

# interzone

FEBRUARY 2001

NUMBER 164

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science fiction & fantasy

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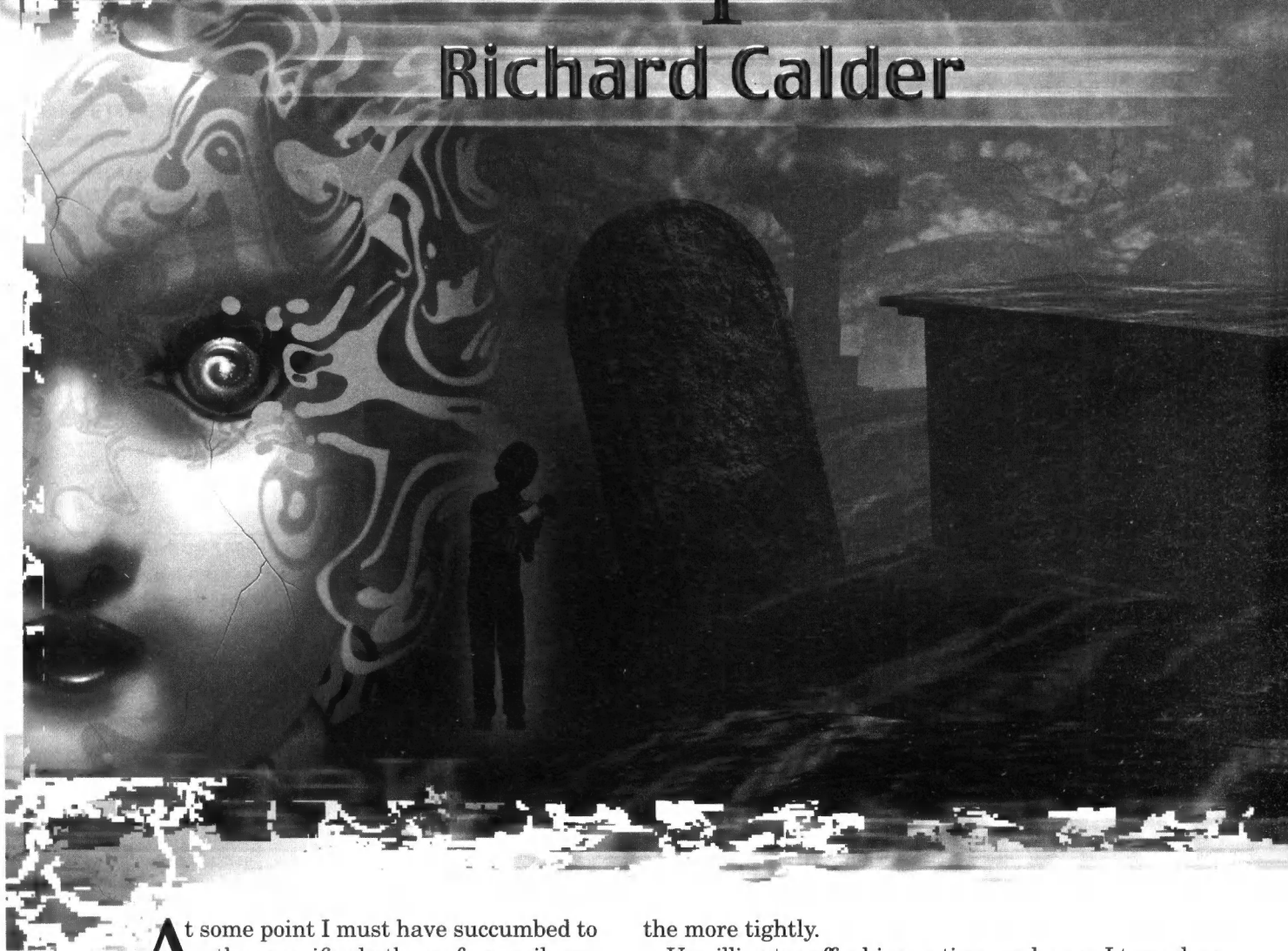
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# The Nephilim

Richard Calder



At some point I must have succumbed to the soporific rhythms of our railway-carriage. When a blast of the whistle at last returned me to full consciousness, I discovered that we were travelling through the outskirts of Epping and would soon be at Castle Thorn, my brother Reginald's country seat.

My grandson sat opposite. Throughout much of our journey he had stared at me relentlessly. Now his eyes were again locked upon my own. Bruised, insomniac, they disconcerted me almost as much as the small but voluptuously modelled doll that he cradled and, sometimes, might be heard whispering to.

"Are you looking forward to meeting your Uncle Reginald?" I said. More than ever, I was desperate to establish some kind of rapport with the child. "Perhaps you would like me to stow your little friend" – I glanced down at the doll with distaste – "in my valise?" By way of reply he scowled and jealously hugged his porcelain innamorata

the more tightly.

Unwilling to suffer his scrutiny any longer, I turned my head and gazed out of the window. The train had begun to slow, the trees to thicken. "You will find these parts quite different from the Naze," I said, drifting into a welcome state of abstraction. The reclaimed countryside had given way to older, less human vistas, that, despite the fine, late summer weather, were shot through with shadows that might have emanated, not merely from another age, but from a climate of affect that had been all but banished from the world – the squall of pleasure and pain that had informed the interregnum, when the gods of the perverse still enjoyed dominion over men's hearts.

A public house came into view. Ranged outside it, in grubby shirt-sleeves and vests, were loud, drunken examples of the newly enfranchised. I studied the crapulous multitude with all the civility that fear and disgust will allow. For how many generations had they been free? Two, three, four? And what had they learnt in that time?





D.E.H. '00

Illustrations by Dominic E. Harman

Nothing. These slaves in all but name might have made of themselves something beautiful; they had, after all, money in their pockets and time on their hands; yet they had turned their backs upon art, music and poetry, and, like perfect case-studies of the effects of the 56th century's industrial revolution, embraced the *ignis fatuus* of commonplace happiness. And it occurred to me – as it did whenever I was confronted by such demotic leavings – that mankind, if it were to rediscover that beauty led to ecstasy and ecstasy to transcendence, might do worse than resubmit to the perverse, that all-but forgotten *Zeitgeist* as mysterious to us, now, as the spirit of the ancient world had been to my distant forebears.

The Pikes, of course – at least those of comparatively recent vintage – had contributed so much to the Darkling Isle's present-day state of decay that my inclination to unambiguously damn the dull, swinish commonality, in word and deed, was always tempered with self-recrimination.

"Are you aware of our family's lineage?" I said, reluctantly turning to face the boy. Ties of blood – if powerless to override the antipathy I felt – could, at least, remind me that he was an orphan. "Did my poor son instruct you in the genealogy of the Pikes?" I waited, determined to have an answer out of him.

The bulbous forehead – plastered with a lick of greasy black hair – glistened, coldly, with the same inverted feverishness that raged behind the eyes. The boy took a big gulp, then exploded into utterance. The verbal shock wave pressed me back into my seat. "*He said I must get the title back!*" Hurriedly composing myself, I nodded in encouragement. Anything, including a spasmodic barrage of distempered words, would be preferable to that quasi-autistic glower. "He said we were robbed of our lands and estates" – his tongue was tripping hot and fast – "because we have goblin blood in us. He said I must, must, must, *must* make sure I reclaim our rights, re-enter London and become Lord Soho!"



As he had spoken, he had twined a length of the doll's horsehair ringlets about an index finger. The finger was bedizened with the ring and seal I had relinquished to my son and which my grandson had inherited by right of primogeniture. "He said it didn't matter what the other children said," he continued. "I was human. Human through and through! And I would one day walk amongst the quality. Wear the ermine. Have a coronet, eight balls on tall points with strawberry leaves! Yes, he knew it. He *knew* it." He switched his attention back to the doll, staring into her eyes with a sadness as much at odds with the repressed fury with which he customarily regarded me, as it was with the cooler, if no less chilling, aspect I had seen him turn upon the world. "Isn't that right, Flag-elleta?"

The boy was mad. His brain curdled by loss and grief. And by something else, too, of course. The curse of the Pikes. *Ah thy people, thy children, thy chosen, marked cross from the womb and perverse...* His soul, like my own – like that of all my ancestors – was besmirched with shadows. Shadows of the same genus as those that fell through the deepening woodland outside. Shadows that had veiled the past, distorted our perception of the present and pre-empted the future. Shadows that it had taken over 4,000 years of turmoil for the Earth to dispel, but which still haunted those whom the perverse had secretly made its own.

I felt a sudden, if accustomed, metaphysical weight descend. My muscles crimped; I hunched over, borne down by a grief no single death could engender, not even that of my beloved son, Richard; no, I mourned my line, and its wretched apotheosis in this crazed, morbid boy.

I felt pity, too, of course. I am, if self-absorbed, no monster. But I was glad that pity, along with gentleness, understanding and all the rest of it, would not have to be put to the test. At least not by me. I looked up. My charge was still consumed with petting his doll. Soon, and soon enough, perhaps, I would turn the little horror over to my brother, who might assume patronage in whatever way he saw fit. And then I would return to Oxford and my studies.

"The first Richard Pike," I said. I paused and peered once more through the window; the train was pulling into the sidings. I would, I had decided, acquit myself of my present responsibilities to the child by way of a swift recapitulation of our family's history. I continued, as expansively as time would allow: "The first of our particular offshoot of the family, that is, sired a half-human upon a female orc. An orc whom, to the outrage of all, and his own eternal disgrace, he had made his paramour. For that crime of miscegenation, Richard Pike the First died in the Far East, in exile. His son, however, returned to London and, as those in our materialistic times might opine, 'made good,' for he was in time ennobled for services to Mammon and the State. *His* son, alas, soon came to know the exile of his grandfather. And if different in kind, it was an exile more lasting in its consequences. On the very day he succeeded to the title our family's enemies raised the issue of his goblin blood and had him cast into the wastes. Not such countryside as you see about you here. But the legacy of the wars between Earth-

Above and the Netherworld. A wasteland of living stone, populated by rogues and thralls. Now *his* son was little more than a mendicant – an itinerant barber, I believe – but the next Pike, that is, Richard Pike the Fifth, was one of those humans we call *incunabula*. The spirit of the ancient past had been reborn in him, and its radiant, preternatural energy changed everybody and, perhaps, everything, he came into contact with. He was the one who made this part of the Darkling Isle his own, by freeing its slaves and leading them into battle against the forces of reaction. My grandfather consolidated his work, though his own son, Richard Pike the Seventh – that is, my father and your great-grandfather – was a black sheep. A retrograde. For many years he lived in Paris, and filled the ears of any who cared to listen with his outlandish amateur politicking, justifications of the master-slave relationship and the like. But, coming to recant his ways, he eventually returned to the fold, and settled once more in England. Or so my mother told me. My father died young. I was barely weaned, Uncle Reginald a mere babe in arms. I too have tried to be faithful to our family's ideals – for God knows, man needs the Ideal – even if our once-noble enterprise has been tarnished. The philosophy of Utilitarianism that permeates the Free Counties, and to which, you'll discover, your Uncle Reginald has dedicated his life's *apologia*, has everywhere left a stain of ugliness and philistinism. Still, there is much to rejoice in, I suppose. If we never have London, and never regain that fusty old title, it would seem a matter of small consequence. You are Richard Pike the Tenth, and you will inherit, in time, all that you see about you. Enough land for any man, I would hazard. A country within a country, you might say. Quarrelled over. Indeed, fought over. But ours, and ours in perpetuity, by indis-soluble right of conquest, and by the consent" – I could not help but grimace – "of those we govern."

"We are born to be great lords of the Darkling Isle," murmured the boy, still looking down at the doll. "Lords, not merely of Essex and its satellites, but of Northumberland, Mercia, Wessex and all the southern counties, too. We are born to be lords of *all*."

But there would be little hope of that. For any man. Neither in space, nor in time. With each passing year, humanity became more unreal. More insubstantial. Such a state of affairs had been prefigured by the incunabula and underwritten by the somnambulistic existence led by those of my contemporaries who resorted to the pharmacopoeia offered up by the new forests. We were a fiction, a dream that had had its day. All we could do was make a graceful exit, retire into the wings and let the Nephilim assume the stage.

Let us then prepare humanity's last refuge, I thought. A true Ideal. An artificial realm of Beauty.

The train lurched, and then came to a halt, a plume of smoke and steam billowing down the platform. I raised the sash window and made to call for a porter. But before the words were out of my mouth my gaze fell upon the family's old gamekeeper, Meyerbeer.

"Master Richard, sir, Master Richard!" he cried. He disappeared, momentarily, in the pale welter of the locomotive.



tive's emissions, then, re-emerging like a spindly wraith, he sped towards our carriage, arms raised in welcome. "Oh, so many years it's been, sir, and you now a famous man an' all. So delighted, sir. Just hand me your bags. That's right, that's it. Got the cart waiting. We'll be home in a shake. And the boy, sir!" – Meyerbeer had raised himself on tiptoe and peered over the window's lip – "Oh, what an image of his father, sir! What a quintessence of Pikery!"

I turned about, wishing to award the boy, on the occasion of this, his adoptive homecoming, a tolerant, if not beneficent, pat on the head. But his aspect remained unchanged. And my arm hung limp at my side.

"There, there," he said, quietly, rocking the bisque-headed girl, his eyes screwed into knots of unhealthy introspection, "there, there, my snuff-stuff, my pain-slut, my death strumpet, my little exhibitionistic tart. Many names you've had, in many universes, Poison, Trash, Mascara, Treacle, Panic, Impurity, and yes, yes, Despair. *Ah beautiful passionate body, that never has ached with a heart!* But to me, my sweet, no matter what falls, to me you will always be my darling *Flagelleta*."

"Gawd love us, Master Pike," said Meyerbeer, "but your grandson's a poet too!"



The dogcart trundled along the meandering bridle-path.

"Is it safe? I said. I thumbed over my shoulder. "I mean, the boy –"

The little psychopath rode in the back, where he was able to indulge his brooding uninterrupted by displays – sham or otherwise – of grandfatherly concern.

"Quite safe," replied Meyerbeer. "Your brother's had the whole woodland sterilized. Did it some years ago, too. No bugaboos here, sir. Just all the nice things we can rejoice in since this land of ours again burst into bloom."

And he was right. The forest was beautiful. Beautiful in a way it had never been in my youth. But that florescence had come at a cost. The trees of living stone that the orcs had deployed to lay waste to Europa's arable lands had died a few generations after the war's conclusion. But unknown to humanity, a cross-fertilization had taken place between the still vital pollens of Earth-Above and the plutonic spore of the Netherworld. The plant life yielded by that union of vegetable and mineral gametes was appropriately eldritch: flora that communicated a beauty infused with terror and a vertiginous sense of loss. About me, twisted forms of red, pink and carmine that sometimes brought to mind a particularly exotic karst formation, sometimes a mad labyrinth of fungoidal growths, rose with desperate, twitching fingers and snatched angrily at the still fallow sky. But these impressions were nothing compared to the creeping realization – one that would have been appalling if the forest had not indeed been so beautiful – that compounding each sticky leaf, every raw, incarnadined stalk or petal, was the morphological suggestiveness of *flesh*.

The forest was like a great, open wound quivering with exposed nerves, cartilage and tendons. Or if not a wound,

an interior world, perhaps, like that most perfect of interiors, the maternal belly, the shafts of sunlight that fell through its rosy-pink integument like a dim foretelling of a life that, for the moment at least, we were able to keep at bay.

"Yes, sir," the old servant went on while chewing on the long stem of his pipe, "Master Reginald has seen to it that we have no Nephilim in these parts. He has a detachment of black knights at his disposal, bless him. They've cleaned things up, and no mistake."

"The black knights," I mused aloud. "Are they then still with us?"

Meyerbeer – sensing, I believe, the need for discretion – said no more, and I fell to pondering on what ulterior motives my younger brother might have for retaining such an unpredictable company of mercenaries in his employ. Our borders were secure; London had even opened an embassy in Colchester; and our satellites – including the one I had made my home – were loyal. We no longer needed the black knights.

A flash of light burst through the tangled branches. As I blinked my eyes and strove to regain the fullness of my vision – the light had been intense – I heard a voice call to me, a human voice that emulated the twitter of bird-song. My vision cleared. Meyerbeer seemed unaffected. I glanced over my shoulder, half suspecting my grandson of some inscrutable mischief. But as usual, the boy was insensible to anything but the Grand Guignol of his inmost thoughts. "The light," I murmured. I focused on the boscage where the afterglow of that sudden refugence seemed to linger, coruscating like fairy dust.

"A light, Master Richard?"

"Pull up here," I said, trying to mask the unaccountable urgency I felt.

"Really, sir, I don't think –"

"Pull up. You said the wood was sterile, didn't you?"

"Yes, but it has its *presence*, sir. A most definite presence. It has –" He shook his head and reined in the horse, conceding to my seigniorial authority.

I jumped down from the dogcart and walked towards the locus still defined by the residual light, orientating myself before it could wink out and leave me unsatisfied as to its origins and meaning. Either because of my susceptibility to Meyerbeer's inarticulate evocation of some indefinable "presence" in these woods, or because some invisible power really did lurk within the twists and folds of its lurid, bucolic gorgeousness, I began to feel absurdly isolated, cut off, I felt, from retreat.

I pressed forward. The undergrowth closed about me. Viciously mutated forms of brier and bramble sliced at my calves and hands. When the afterglow did, at last, suddenly disappear, it was as if I had been jerked out of a swoon; I found myself stumbling through a shadow-infested brake, lost, directionless, without a quarry. I came to a halt and looked up through the canopy and its haze of pink leaves and late afternoon sunlight – a light too near, too credible, to be confused with the unearthly beacon that had momentarily blinded me on the bridle-path. A pollen-rich scent filled my nostrils, sweet, yet musky, like the hot, perfumed skin of a thousand sylvan



nymphs. I lowered my gaze and scanned the undergrowth afresh. The breeze had relinquished its hold upon bloom and bud. Time had slowed, as if yearning for its own cessation. Petals that had flapped like excoriated by-products of some exquisite and fathomless torture found their longed-for quietus. Beads of sweat hung cool and unmoving on my brow. I too then felt, I think, the same yearning that this new, transfigured Nature shared – a yearning for release such as I had always felt, but refined, in that breathless moment, to such a pitch of feeling that – if I had not at once resolved to push deeper into the thick, pulpy shrubs – I might have given way to the overwhelming temptation to sink to my knees, stretch out upon the soft ground, close my eyes, and give myself up to the mystery that called out to my soul.

The vegetation was like a sucking wound – a microcosm of the great wound of the forest itself. The playground of my boyhood, which had previously offered up glimpses of familiarity, was now displaced, and displaced utterly, by the alien landscape of the new parturition. Wading through its torpid confines, tearing at branch and leaf, the air seemed filled with an almost sentient tremulousness, as if it were attempting to confer upon me the mystery of its pullulating life. I held a hand before my face. It was stained with crimson sap. It too trembled, like the air and all else. But I knew I would have no answers until I had penetrated the forest's utmost depths.

Something, I knew, waited for me there.

I soon came to a little glade. The light here was mellow, a gloaming that would not have been out of place in a reawakened Arcadia. If Arcadia's twilight bowers, that is, had ever been so frankly visceral as to suggest that one had walked into the gullet of a fabulous beast. I stood, I knew instinctively, at the forest's centre. Its very vitals. And the light, despite a disparateness in intensity, was the same as that which a few minutes earlier had so assaulted my senses.

A girl-child sat upon a stool milking a cow. I was not a believer, but the manifestation of a saint, angel or the Virgin herself, could not, at that moment, have more profoundly surprised me. The sight I was met with was so unexpected, so intimate, so sanctified by the most precious of memories, that I was smitten by a sense of revelation as effectively as if I had been brought suddenly face to face with the divine.

Stooped over her pail, and consumed with milking, the child had not seemed to notice me. But then softly, she began to sing.

Long years ago – fourteen, maybe,  
When but a tiny babe of four,  
Another baby played with me,  
My elder by a year or more;

A little child of beauty rare,  
With marv'lous eyes and wondrous hair,  
Who, in my child-eyes, seemed to me  
All that a little child should be!

Ah, how we loved, that child and I!

How pure our baby joy!  
How true our love – and, by the bye,  
He was a little boy!

I crept forward. "Patience?" I ventured.

She looked up and held my gaze. There could be no mistake. Here was the girl I had grown up with, the russet-haired daughter of one of our tenant farmers, a child who, in my infancy, had been my constant playmate, and later, my adolescent love. Here was the girl whom Reggie and I had quarrelled over. The girl an old widower could not forget. The girl he still adored.

I drew a hand across my face, as if to wipe away all possibility of having fallen victim to a cruel illusion. She remained, more real than ever, as immutable as the sepia photograph I kept in my rooms at Christ Church. The pathos of her ghostly form glowed with such numinousness that I felt my throat constrict. "But Patience you... you are *dead*."

The crepuscular glade deepened to maroon. The vermilion shadows grew longer. And the fire, the holy fire that was immanent in all things here, became correspondingly more profound. The shadows burst into flame. The light was infused with a dark resplendence. Approximations of furze, hawthorne, fern and thyme shone, delirious with that indwelling *presence* that, I now knew, was beyond the articulation of not only a Meyerbeer, but all men. My heart brimmed with love; the quiescent landscape shivered. Leaves rustled like dry, chapped skin, heralding, perhaps, the approach of afrits, fetches and flibbertigibbets. And then once more all became deathly quiet, the stillness punctuated only by the dull tom-tom of my pulse.

"I'm not dead, Ritchie," she said, her voice so at one with the spirit of place that the silence seemed unbroken. "I'm fate. Your fate. Don't be frightened. Come close. Please. There's something I must tell you." An inchoate smile played upon her lips. She might have been one of Krishna's playmates, about to invite me to a game of celestial hide-and-seek or some other rumbustious sport of eternity. And when the smile burst forth it was indeed so transcendental that I did as I had been bidden, careless of whatever might lurk behind her enchantment. "Here, in the forest, we are out of time. Time is your universe, Ritchie. The universe of men. A universe that I and my kind cannot yet inherit. It is of time I would speak."

I stood by her side. Unconcerned, she continued her work, the rhythmical noise of milk impacting against the side of her pail echoing across the glade. "I'm 68 years old," I said. "But you –" Time? She was untouched by time. And free, mercifully free, of its scars. As Epping's petrified vegetation had given way to a strange, new life, it had thrown up a strain of cowpox that had been fatally related to the causative agent of its human equivalent. What had once conferred immunity upon England's milkmaids had, in our modern world, proved their undoing. Patience had died a few days before her 18th birthday.

I mustered my resolve. Tentatively, I placed an open hand upon the crown of her head, much as a grown man might bestow a respectful caress upon a little niece, or



grandchild; then, abandoning myself to the moment, I slipped my fingers through the silky, tumultuous locks, and allowed myself to luxuriate in her corporeality. "You're real," I gasped. I smelt the sweat on her, musky and sweet as the forest itself; and her flushed complexion – almost vulgar in its stark, workaday matter-of-factness – provoked in me such a hyperaesthesia that I became giddy and feared I might black out. In certain women, the prosaic world that I usually decried was transformed, made supersensual, and the ethereal affectations I cultivated to serve as a bulwark against "the commonplace" would be fatally undermined. "You're not a ghost," I added, with the simplicity of a man whose poetic defences are all down, the literalness of her truth and beauty allowing no paraphrase or abstraction. "Yet –" Without forethought, I looked to where I had entered the glade. Poking above the long, tendril-like grass that grew about the clearing's perimeter were the remains of old tombstones. Seeing them, I was seized by an immediacy of recognition as potent as that which I had felt when first confronted by the resurrected Patience. "My God. This is the place where we buried you. Amongst family, friends and beloved servants. The old forest cemetery. But how it has all changed!"

"I haven't changed, Ritchie."

She had stopped her milking and swung about on her stall so that she looked up into my face. Grasping my hand, she gently disengaged it from her massy locks. Then she pulled it towards her lap. I hunkered, obedient to her will. Our eyes levelled. I felt my old bones protest at the strain. And unable to gainsay the years as glibly as could my dead love, I teetered backwards, my fortuitously commodious rump cushioning my fall. I crossed my legs. Groaned, then sighed. Now it was she who looked down at me. I was a child again, an overgrown boy in cut-away coat, flannel trousers and spats, about to be told some fantastic story.

"Ritchie, I *am* alive. But I am not yet fully realized. The crucible of my becoming is the same as that of the new Nature. I am human and I am perverse. But I am something else, too. Something that yet struggles to find expression." She pressed my fingers gently within her own. Then, with the hint of a frown creasing her brow, she gazed towards the tombstones. "They buried me just as the forests began to change. They had thought this little acre of the Netherworld dead forever. But the soil within which I had been interred was possessed of a dark vitality. I slept, and as I slept, I dreamed that I became as the flowers, the vines, the trees and the creepers that you see about you. And when I awoke, my body *was* the forest, my spirit, its spirit. I had become the waking dream that will soon consume all mankind."

"Yes," I said, wonderingly, "I know the dream you speak of. It is the Ideal, the refuge of art, music and poetry."

"You are still such a little boy, Ritchie. The new world that will shortly come has no place in it for your kind. And yet –"

A stillness descended, greater than any before, a silence like that possessed by the unmoving winds that fill the deserts of everlastingness. I followed her eyes. She

looked out across a border of the glade where a handful of cropped treetops allowed a view of the sharply rising countryside immediately beyond. The turrets of Castle Thorn were plainly visible.

"And yet, if humans have had their day," she continued, "then we sometimes still need their services." She seemed to tire of the forest vista; her big, black eyes once more looked into my own. The pupils were so radically dilated that they might have been infused with some novel variety of belladonna. I straightened my back. Breathed deep. Loosened my studs. "Will you help us, Ritchie? Will you be one of the mortal harbingers of the new dawn?"

"For you, Patience –"

She put a finger to my lips.

"It's the boy," she said. "The one you have in your charge. It may not seem so now, but he will restore your line. And *his* grandson –" She removed the finger; I made to follow it, like a lapdog teased with a choice morsel, my lips pursed to steal a kiss. She tapped me on the nose, in playful reproach, and smiled. "I cannot speak of that. But remember this: it will be a Pike who ushers in the new heaven and the new hell: the union of Earth-Above and the Netherworld. It will be a Pike who will bring an end to the human world and deliver the Nephilim into Time. That is why the boy must be protected."

I shrugged, and, despite the sombre music of the glade's stillness, almost laughed. "Is he in such danger?"

"Your brother means to kill him, Ritchie. You have renounced all claims to the title. With the boy out of the way, the succession falls to Reginald."

If I still had reason to feel amused, my certainty that she was sincere, if possibly misguided, killed the laughter at its root. I shook my head. "Reginald? We've had our disagreements, but this –"

"I cannot say more," she said, more excitedly. "Just remember. Please. The Nephilim cannot achieve full incarnation until the present world passes away. Then, when time comes to an end, we who have been dreams and myths will take your place, becoming real even as you become insubstantial. Please, Ritchie. I need you. The Nephilim need you." She touched my cheek. A tear glistened on one of her long, black eyelashes. "Help me, Ritchie. Help all the Nephilim. Look over the boy and become one with your fate. Fulfil the time opera of the Pikes!"

"Yes, of course," I said hurriedly, "it's just all that you say is so –" The sensation of her hand against my cheek gave way to that of a breeze. A vagrant outline lingered; and then all trace of her disappeared. The stillness, that until then had been disturbed but once by an all but imperceptible sighing and rasping of the leaves, was now punctuated by the susurrations of insects, birdsong, and, most stridently, a holler of "Master Richard, Master Richard! Are you all right, sir? Are you all right?"

At the entry point to the glade stood Meyerbeer, and behind him, staring at me through a crook of inflamed undergrowth with his usual baleful intensity, the boy, the loathsome, burdensome boy a ghost had urged me to guard with my life.

Time had begun again, and the destiny that it had

been suggested was inextricably linked to its progress – the metaphoric “grand opera” in which, it seemed, I played a leading part – had forced me centre stage, careless of how little I knew of plot, libretto or score.

I leaned back in the red morocco armchair. I was a big man – as corpulent as I was unkempt, some had opined – my brother, though only 13 months my junior, slight and dapper. But if Reginald’s constitution remained sprightly, then time had found other, more malicious ways, of effecting its ruin. His eyes, for instance. Their capricious, almost epigrammatic, twinkle, could not disguise the smolderings of bitterness that only three score or more years can confer. He knew, as did I, the fallacies of friendship and love, and had learnt to live without benefit of the everyday affections that provide our existences with a necessary palliative. Time, it seemed, had stopped for no one but Patience.

“You seem in parlous want of irrigation, Ritchie. Pink Villain?”

“You remembered, Reggie.”

“Pink Villain it is then. Still a man with the tastebuds of a viper, I see!” He signalled to the butler to mix, pour and serve me my accustomed tippie, then dismissed him. The smoking room was softly lit. I took a long drag on my cigarette and contentedly exhaled, a long, blue-grey whorl issuing from post-prandial lips that still carried the greasy aftertaste of an excellent goose. We were alone. “So how’s life amongst the dreaming spires? Still serving the lapidary muse?”

“I haven’t had anything published for some time, Reggie. It is put about that I am one of yesterday’s men.”

“You were always the futilitarian, Ritchie.”

I raised my eyes ostentatiously towards the bookshelves. “Better futile than utile, Reggie.”

“Now don’t get into a freak, Ritchie.” He took an equally long drag on his own cigarette and then gazed meditatively into the contents of his brandy-glass. “Sick-making, really,” he continued, after sending another cerulean plume circulating above the reading-lamp to sport about the cardboard spines of his meagre, eminently functional, library. “The amount of misunderstanding, and – let’s face it, Ritchie – bad blood that there’s been between us over the years, does neither of us credit.” He gave a shy little grin. “Bad blood, to the contrary, should prove our bond. We both have orc in us, do we not? The blood that provided our enemies with the excuse to dis seize us of our rights? Now there’s the question of the boy. Another point of common ground. Let’s bury the hatchet, eh? Let’s look to the future. *Little Ritchie’s* future.”

“The boy has problems,” I sighed, inclined to wax upon the boy’s loathsomeness, if only to prick the bubble of my brother’s condescension. “He’s quite disturbed. *His* past will not be buried so easily, I feel.”

“You say he looks... different.”

“You and I have got off lightly, Reggie. We have this slaty, somewhat squamous skin” – I placed an illustrative forefinger to my jowl – “but there’s little else to show that our distaff side is contaminated.”

“But all that was so long ago in the family’s history,

Ritchie. No Pike has got a goblin woman with child since the black knight, old Richard Pike the First, entered into a *mésalliance* with his accursed Gala.”

“Bad blood will out,” I said. “The boy is ugly. Supremely ugly. Not just in aspect, but in mind, I fear. Yes, he is disturbed. Very disturbed. But you must form your own opinions, of course, when you meet him.”

“When you said the lad was feverish and should be taken straight to bed, I readily concurred, Ritchie. But perhaps I have been too precipitate.” He sipped his brandy and frowned. “Disturbed you say?”

“Horribly disturbed.”

“Perhaps – perhaps some kind of confinement might be in order?” I lowered my eyes. I could sense his thoughts racing towards some happily life-threatening prognosis. “I will have to consult a doctor, of course. There is no doubt medication to be had. All kinds of medication.”

“No doubt,” I said.

“Perhaps exercise would be in order, too,” he continued. “We have a boating lake. And then there’s riding, of course. And shooting. All manner of expedients, in fact.”

“You have your philosophy, Reggie, and I have mine. But since you are assuming full responsibility for the boy’s upbringing, I do not consider it appropriate to say more.” I smiled with all the complaisance of a man practised in the art of cut and run. But my guard was up. I was here, not merely to discharge myself of certain responsibilities, but to take up new ones. Responsibilities that Patience had allotted me. Responsibilities I knew I could not deny. “Let me just conclude that boating, riding and shooting, wonderfully dangerous activities that they are, should not compromise the lad’s education. Have you thought of sending him away to school?”

“Away? No, no,” he said, easing himself deeper into his chair’s leather folds. “Certainly not. He shall have his education here.” He took a thoughtful lungful of smoke, then exhaled with the peremptoriness of someone eager to get down to business. “I shall begin it by having him recognize that humanity has only two real masters: pleasure and pain, and that the moral high ground is occupied by those who promote the former at the expense of the latter.”

“Hedonic calculus,” I muttered, unable to hold my peace.

“What was that, Ritchie?”

“I said life is more than a balance of pleasure over pain. You haven’t changed, Reggie. You still place your faith in the Darkling Isle’s old gods, the Nihil, the Zero and the Void.”

He tipped his head in suave concession. “If you like, yes. I am a Positivist, a Materialist and a Utilitarian. I believe in scientific truth. Yes, yes, I am a *Nihilist*.”

“And aestheticism?”

“I *hate* aestheticism.” Though he smiled, his hand trembled, a little brandy spilling over the rim of his glass. “Quantity of pleasure being equal, pushpin is as good as poetry.”

I lifted my own glass to my lips, tipped back my head and downed in one go. The cocktail, pink, villainous and indeed – in the proportions in which it had been mixed – quite infernal, released me from the inhibitions wrought



by long years of brotherly dissociation.

"The quest for ultimate knowledge of Nature is misguided, Reggie. In order truly to know something it is necessary in some sense to have made it. Humanity can only hope to understand its own created universe. Its world of fictions, linguistic, plastic and mathematical."

"Spoken like a true incunabulum, Ritchie."

"I am not, nor do I wish to be, an incunabulum, Reggie, no matter how many other Pikes have been blessed, or perhaps doubly cursed, by providing a host to the past's spiritual, or artistic, forms. But fiction is to be understood. Yes, and emulated, too. For extra-textual reality is being annihilated. And man must go *some-where*."

"Ah, now there you go again! Ultra-poetical, super-aesthetical!"

"Listen, Reggie: this age's utilitarian philosophies must die, along with its philistinism. Only the text has value in itself. But in the end, the textual world merely points the way. The material universe is but a copy of the Ideal, and art, until now, has been but a copy of a copy. I wish to go beyond mimesis. I wish to discover, or invent, if you will, *new* truths and *new* worlds. Supersensible worlds not yet conceived! A new universe we can retreat into, after this one collapses under the weight of its own contradictions."

My brother snorted. "Except that it won't collapse. Mankind is here to stay. A new humanity based on sound principles."

I gazed up at the electric trolley. The Pink Villain had set me on fire. A current, an inspired, poetic current, passed through my body. "Our time has passed. Mankind is doomed to leave this world, and leave it soon. It is the Nephilim who will inherit the planet."

"They will inherit nothing," said my brother. He put his brandy-glass down on the little table by his side. Then he leaned forward and stubbed out his cigarette in the chromium bulb of the long, columnar ashtray that stood between us. "Can't take your snifter any more, eh, Ritchie? Perhaps it's time we —"

"But what do *you* expect to inherit?" I said, indeed rather drunk by now. "This evening, I've been treated to your usual cant about how we should all seek to increase the world's small stock of pleasure. How we should legislate against pain! But what is your purpose? Your real agenda?"

He rose from his chair, took a few steps forward, and stood over me, the sallow light casting his shadow across my armchair. He had changed. No longer the *viveur* bubbling with the latest, trite ideas, he seemed old, terribly old, imbued with an ancientness that was as primordial as the curse of the Pikes.

"You are the Ideal poet," he said. "But I have always been a dithyrambist of the *fleshly*. It is the world I care about. This world. And if you'd have ever ventured far beyond your anaemic little Oxford, and taken a look at the pit-villages, slums, bestialism and sheer wretchedness that surrounds you and

serves to bolster your privileged life, you might care, too. I am a practical man. For me, power is the thing. The power to shape, change and yes, increase that 'small stock of pleasure' you so airily deride. And the only real power in this divided land of ours is London. That is my rhyme, Ritchie. And if you can't see the reason in it, too bad."

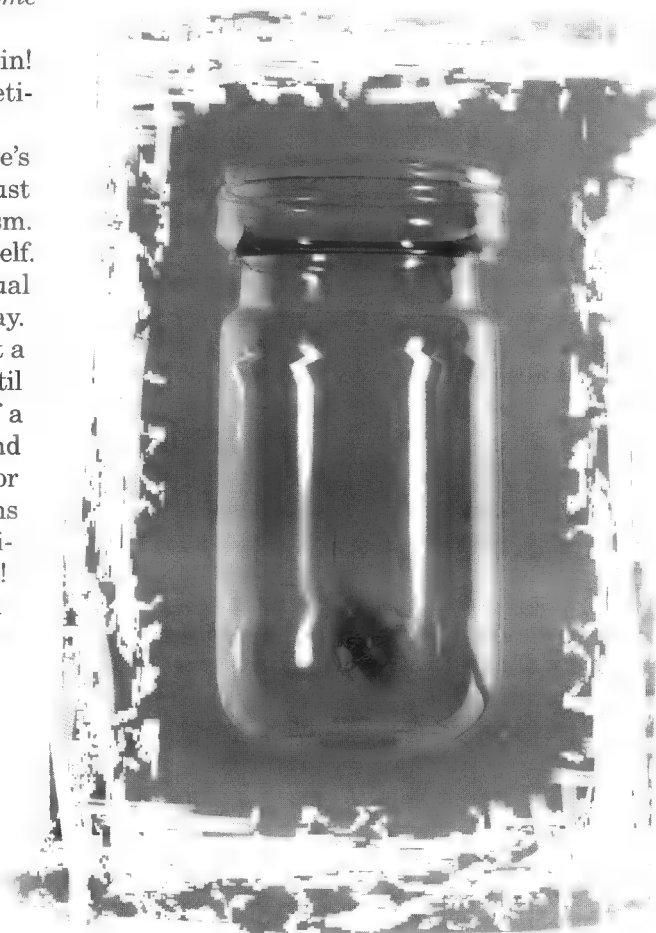
I compressed my big, meaty hands into fists and brought them down upon the upholstery. "You are a fleshly sham," I burst out. I strove to moderate my tone. I was a little cowed by the force of his proximity. "You want to be Lord Soho. That's the truth of it. The rhyme and the reason, eh, Reggie?"

His face darkened. He did not reply.

"I've heard things about Castle Thorn," I continued. "That you keep a detachment of black knights here, for instance."

He pulled back his shoulders.

Sighted me along his aquiline nose. "You have chosen the path of escape, Ritchie," he said. "But I choose engagement. Mercia is making belligerent rumblings, our satellites are growing querulous and all the time these damnable *Nephilim* continue to spawn. Be assured, London will take advantage." He pivoted on his heels, turned, stepped forward, picked up the brandy-glass, swiftly drained it, and then slammed the glass back onto the table's scarred marquetry. "But I will unite this fell nation of ours. I will be the first Pike to return to his ancestral seat. I will make London open its gates to me, Ritchie, do you hear? Or I'll put the whole bloody city to the torch! And once I am installed I will reconcile the rebel counties with the Darkling Isle's autocracy." Without turning to face me or bid me goodnight, he slicked back an errant, grey



lock with his hand, then walked across the room towards the door. "You renounced the title a long time ago, Ritchie. You have no right to interfere." He opened the door. And as he stepped through, he at last glanced backwards. "Go back to your silly ivory tower. Your life: it has been... *unmasculine*. Leave politics to grown-ups. Men who are not afraid to *realize* their dreams."

And then he left.

After a few minutes, I got up. The war was old. And it was old wounds that prompted me to action. I would not have the lapidary muse sacrificed to a shallow, self-serving trumpeting of the "greatest happiness of the greatest number."

Man was made for transcendence.



I went directly to my grandson's bedchamber.

I entered stealthily. The drapes were pulled, and the room's panelling was lustrous with moonlight. A canopied four-poster, boasting the family's armorial shield, stood directly before a massive wardrobe, the door of which had, at sometime during the night, yawned open. The furniture was familiar to me from my own childhood. It had long seemed to have been designed for the sole purpose of seeding an infant brain with nightmares. As I crept forward, I noticed the small, fidgety body on the bed, its outlines illuminated by the silvery light as softly as the ancient, cherry-wood walls. My grandson was awake. I stepped over a shuffled-off eiderdown and sat down on the mattress's edge.

On arriving at Castle Thorn I had sent the child directly to his room. Meyerbeer had escorted him. I had wished, of course, to keep my grandson out of harm's way until I could properly ascertain the measure of my brother's intentions. But the "fever" that I had cited as a pretext for his precipitant seclusion had seemed to have actualized itself, as if to task me for telling such a bald lie. The boy's glazed eyes made no acknowledgement of my presence and he was covered in a patina of sweat. I was uncertain what to do, or even say. Then I noticed the doll that sat propped up against the bedside lamp.

"They have electricity, here," I said. "My brother's very modern. Would you like the light on?" I reached out to pull the lamp's cord.

"Don't touch her," said the boy, very quietly.

"I was just —" I let my arm drop to my side, content to sit in the moon-bathed shadows. To one side of the doll stood a jar. Peering closer, I saw that it contained a cockroach. "Did you bring that with you, too?" I said, with resigned disgust. The boy turned his head on the pillow. The whites of his eyes shone luminously in the darkness.

"Do you know what I think of, when I lie awake on nights like this?"

"Please tell," I said, expecting the worse.

"Of the East," he said. "It's in the East that all will be decided. The Far East, where our family line was accursed."

"Ah yes, the *first* Richard Pike. I remember telling you,

of course."

"Father told me," he said. "And other things, too. About how our line will remain accursed until we expiate our crimes. That's why I have to go there. If I'm to be Lord Soho, that is. But I think of other things, too, when I lie like this, with the shadows all about. I think of the other world. The world that's my home."

"And what world is that?"

"I don't know its name," he said, his eyes widening with what might have been longing, or fear, "but I'm most near it in the dark. Lying in bed. Or wandering through midnight alleys, deserted warehouses, the tow-paths of disused canals, late-night underpasses and dock-yards. Yes; that is when I sense the nearness of my home. The one I long to return to. A nameless place I only half recall, a place of violent ecstasy and beauty."

I looked away. The perturbation I felt whenever he held me with his stare had returned. "You speak like many a Pike before you," I said. My voice was as quiet as his own. I was conscious that I could not disguise its tremor. "We are invested with something alien that is only partly accounted for by our hereditary curse. Yes, there is something in us more alien by far..."

"Father would say it was the sword."

"The sword?"

"Our family heirloom. *Espiritu Santo*."

"Ah," I sighed. "That sword."

"Its spirit is in us. An alien spirit. At least, that's what father would tell me."

"That is what *I* would tell *him*," I said. "But the sword is lost. As are we. There is another holy spirit abroad. It informs the forests and woods. And soon, very soon, I think it will displace us, spirit *and* body."

I tensed; cast a swift glance at the supine boy, unaccountably heedful that he might be about to sit up on the bed and spring at me like a feral animal. I need not have feared. His eyes shone, wolf-like, out of the shadows, but his insomniac form was otherwise expressive only of the prickly agitation felt by anyone who has to suffer the unremitting consciousness of a long, hot summer's night.

"But why" — I found myself studying the jar and its skittering occupant — "why the cockroach?"

I heard the boy's feet ruck the ground sheet as he once more surrendered to his fidgeting. "Uncle believes that pleasure is all, does he not? That pain must be banished from this world?"

"Yes," I said, surprised at the boy's intuitive grasp. "But much of what he says is rhetorical. It is power that he wants."

"Of course. He is a Pike. He knows, deep down, like you know, and I know, that pleasure and pain are one. And that happiness is a lie. A vulgar lie. Power is all. The blood and the life. Power is beauty."

The cockroach's skittering became more intense. Repeatedly, it tried to scale the jar, only to collapse upon its back. Its feelers whirled like sabres. Then it charged at the walls of its glassy confinement, as if it would smash through, leap and tear at my throat in compensation for my grandson's impassivity. The noise it made filled the room. And then the noise found its way inside



my head. An army of its confederates had crawled into my ears and infested my brain, all to the greater glory of the insect empire.

"The roach knows too," said the boy. "Isn't she superb? She loves power. The power that is death. Oh yes, my pretty, we hear you. We hear what you say. *You want to die in the arms of your beloved!*"

And then the insect-noise disappeared, overwhelmed suddenly by the shrill, metallic ululation of the thing at the open window.

I shot up from the bed so fast that my foot snagged on a corner of the rug. I was sent sprawling. The titanic vibrations sent up by the infelicitous meeting of 300 pounds of flesh with the floor amounted to a minor earthquake. Several picture frames slid from the wall; the night-table fell over. Clocks, chamberpot, crockery and other less collectable, but more noisome items, jumped into the air and then smashed. The barrage ceased. On rising – I was as swift about it as my bulk, years and panicked heart would allow – I came to a swift assessment of the situation. And I knew that if I did not act at once, both I and the boy would be killed.

Countless genotypes figured amongst the variegated life that had emerged from England's new forests. Some appeared human, like the form I had met with some hours previously. Such creatures were shape-shifters. Non-corporeal. But the creature into whose eyes I stared was wholly flesh and blood, a species of Nephilim itself entire. Therein lay its danger. One that, if less grave than that presented by its ghostly brothers and sisters, was more immediate. In the brief interlude of my pratfall and recovery it had pulled itself up onto the window ledge, where it crouched, ready to spring.

It was a sphinx. I had, until now, seen such creatures only in copperplate engravings. Like so many of its kind, it was beautiful.

Its slim, graceful body was that of a great cat. Across the moon-kissed fur of its shoulders and haunches – limned like silver thread – were two folded, gently curving wings. And its face was that of a young woman. The delicate, Mediterranean features were crowned with a long-tiered coiffure of black curls, like that of an ancient Greek or Egyptian princess. The keening had stopped, and the creature's satiny gaze darted from the boy to me and back again, the uncertain flick of its tail underlining the obvious confusion it felt at my unscheduled presence.

I rushed the thing, yelling some hoarse warning to my grandson as I crashed past the bed.

I need not have been so solicitous. Bent, as I was, on frustrating the sphinx's patently murderous plans, I had not seen the boy take the twelve-gauge shotgun out from under the bedsheets; did not hear him cock its triggers; neither had I indeed recognized the thunderous discharge for what it was until I had had time to come to a sudden halt, hunker, and watch – with shoulders pulled up to my ears – the Nephilim splay its claws, forsake its hold of the sill, leap backwards, and, with a single, piercing shriek, vanish into the night.

I placed a hand upon my chest, unable to believe that my manically-beating heart was still intact. Then I

straightened myself and staggered to the window. Gingerly poking my head between the thin, ogival frame and out into the night, I surveyed the treetops. Their shadows revealed nothing. Neither did the ground two floors below show evidence of a body or blood. Not wishing to make further reconnaissance – I feared I might at any moment be rewarded by the sight of the thing bearing down on me, or meet with an abrupt decapitation – I retreated inside.

After I had locked the window I turned about. My grandson knelt on the bed, the shotgun still against his shoulder. He squinted down the sights, the smoking barrels following me as I moved across the room.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said. "I'm here to help. Really I am. Now put it down." As I neared, he reluctantly let the gun sag in his hands so that its muzzle pointed towards the mattress.

"I fired both shells anyway," he murmured, talking as if to himself, his gaze averted and taking in the broken glass and peppered drapes.

I leaned over the bed and grasped the gun by its barrels. One tug and it slipped out of his hands. I pulled it across the sheets, towards me. I broke it; saw that what he had said was true; then placed the gun upon the floor.

"Did I hit it?" he said. He rubbed at his head with his knuckles as if trying to shed the scarious folds that covered the bumpy flesh.

"I don't know." My whole body shook with the effort of catching my breath, the knowledge of what my grandson was capable, and the apprehension of what he might do next.

"It's Uncle, isn't it?" He lay back and stared up at the ceiling. "Uncle wants me dead. Fat chance. I'm no roach-boy. I'm a lord. A master. I fight back. But what do we do now?" Before I could think of a suitable answer, the door was thrown open. Between the jambs stood Meyerbeer, a shotgun like that which the boy had used raised and pointing irresolutely into the bedchamber's shadows.

Behind him, emerging from the darkness of the hallway, to be illumined finally by the candlestick he held before his face, was my brother, the look of perplexity and outrage that he affected as sham, I knew, as his philosophy.



"I've dismissed Meyerbeer, of course," he said at breakfast.

"I don't really see that it's his fault, Reggie. The boy is persuasive. Cunning. A subtle child. Besides which, it was certainly lucky – and lucky for us all – that he *did* prevail upon old Meyerbeer to loan him the gun."

"It's unforgivable. Someone could have been killed. No, really Ritchie, Meyerbeer has to go."

"The threat was real, Reggie. I saw it. Nephilim. In the form of a sphinx."

He shook his head and shovelled a forkful of bacon and egg off the *rose Pompadour* Sèvres and into his mouth.

"I've told you, Ritchie, the forest has been sanitized. Look, I'll get you to meet the captain of the black knights.

He'll vouch for what I've said. He's billeted a few miles down the road. Take the boy with you if you like. Drop of fresh air and all that. I'm sure the captain will –"

"And it's not the only thing I've seen, Reggie," I interrupted, setting my silverware upon the mat and gazing across the long, highly polished table.

"What do you mean?" he said, his face frozen in a mid-masticatory grimace.

"Do you remember Patience, Reggie?"

He too put down his knife and fork. Then he put his hands together underneath his chin, steeped his fingers and then let them take the weight of his jaw. He began to chew again, slowly, with infinite care, as if eager to conceal as yet unsuspected machinations.

"Ah yes. Of course. Patience. The cause of our estrangement, Ritchie. Never forgotten. No indeed. Not poor little Patience."

"If there *are* Nephilim in these parts, like that sphinx I saw last night – chimeras you're either too abashed, or too circumspect, to talk about – then other Nephilim will undoubtedly be present here, too."

"I really can't see what you might be alluding to, Ritchie."

"Why did you sanitize the forest, Reggie?" I sucked the fat off the tip of my right index finger. "Is it because you fear her? Is it because you fear Patience?" I drew the wet finger across the sheeny black tabletop. A snail-like trail glistened in its wake.

He looked at me very steadily. "You're a child still. You really are. You and that boy make quite a pair. But some things are better put behind one. Patience, for instance. It seems you have not outgrown her, Ritchie. Just as you have not outgrown your other youthful follies, such as the idealism you affect, your *décadence*."

"She's alive, Reggie," I said. "I don't believe she's one of those you *can* kill."

For a time, and it seemed a long time, he said nothing. Then, as he took up his fork, reached out to the serving dish, stabbed a rasher of bacon and transferred it directly to his mouth, his coolness at last gave way to undisguised antipathy.

"Mankind has been too obsessed with the past. Our desire to rediscover the science and art of the Ancients has been like some absurd need to recover some mythical, lost innocence. But the thing about innocence, Ritchie, is that you only really know what it is after it's been lost. Truly lost. In engaging in hopeless attempts to resurrect it we become the past's slaves. We must resist such enchantments. There's no going back. We need to be our own men. Patience? Forget about her. She was nothing but trouble."

My brother was always a poor liar when it came to matters of love. And in his eyes I saw that he still wanted her for his bride. Wanted her so much, in fact, that he might well try to kill her to prevent her loving anyone else.



The boy and I sat on the village green. It was a warm,

late afternoon. The road we had taken had led through an area of cleared forest, where my brother planned to erect "model homes" for those of his labourers employed in the mechanized dairy industry he was in the process of establishing. But there was no sign of mechanization here. Only pleasant reminders of childhood. Sights that summoned up the world that had existed before the new industrialization had spread its blight across the land.

Eager to get myself and the boy out of Castle Thorn for a few hours I had taken up my brother's suggestion to walk into the village and meet the captain of the black knights. But now I had arrived I felt disinclined to follow through. I might, after all, be leading the boy into a trap.

Still, follow through I must. I needed to appease Reginald. Humour him. As yet, I had nothing but the vatic entreaties of a long-dead girl and my own suspicions to calibrate the extent of his guilt. That he was a cad I had no doubt. That he was engaged in dirty business I was certain. But despite all that had occurred, I marvelled to think of him as a murderer.

I watched the hands of the church clock – as notably regular, I hoped, as the captain's drinking habits – move towards opening time. The meeting would be in a public place. The village pub that stood opposite. My brother had wired ahead; the captain, it seemed, would be waiting for us in his customary snug. No assassination, I tried to reassure myself, could possibly be attempted before witnesses.

Ten minutes to go. I looked about, my stomach fluttering with misgiving. Village maidens strolled along the margins of the pond. The sight of them at first calmed me, so much did each one remind me of Patience; and in that calmness I was lifted out of time and filled with bitersweet delight; but their conversation, when it became audible, brought me smartly back to earth. It was unutterably distressing. A colloquy anti-idyllic in the extreme.

"Oh, That Reginald Pike, you mean, the master of the manor!"

"Such a darling! So practical!"

"I adore a practical man."

"A man flash, pragmatic and utilitarian!"

"A man who puts the sex in sexagenarian!"

"But while he, the very cynosure of our eyes and hearts, remains icy insensible – what have we to strive for?"

Handsome, *comme il faut*, a dashing man of the world whose family curse only leant him a hint of dangerous glamour, my brother's erotic successes had been as legion and effortless as mine had been modest and hard-won. Indeed, even my late wife once admitted that, if it had not been for the long years I had spent refining my wit, wardrobe and *boutonnière*, I would have likely been doomed to a life of fat, poetic celibacy.

The maidens passed by. Their mortifying chatter receded. And I was left alone with the boy.

During our sojourn on the green I had tried to prevent myself gazing upon him. But it had proved impossible. His presence demanded attention, like some terrible accident to which people are drawn by appalled wonder rather than any genuine sense of empathy. In his hands



he held Flagellata, recently stripped of her little dress. The denuded minikin had been subjected to some kind of surgery. One arm was missing. The other limbs curiously transposed. And a vent had been cut in her abdomen. About her neck, tied to a piece of thread, was the corpse of the cockroach that he had kept beside his bed in a jar. *"She loved the games men played with death, where death must win..."* cooed the boy, toying with the doll's moulting hair.

"I often think of your sister, you know," I said. "Now Jane was a good girl."

"Jane's dead," he answered, perfunctorily. Both my grand-daughter and her nurse had perished in a boating accident. Little Ritchie had been the only survivor. My son's heart had been torn in twain. Remembering his tears, I could not help feel that he, and perhaps all of us, had been betrayed, then as now, by the callous detachment of his heir.

I found myself extemporizing an admonitory piece of doggerel.

"Gentle Jane was as good as gold,  
She always did as she was told;  
She never spoke when her mouth was full,  
Or caught bluebottles their legs to pull,  
Or spilt plum jam on her nice new frock,  
Or put white mice in the eight-day clock,  
Or fostered a passion for alcohol,  
Or vivisected her last new doll."

The boy's caresses of the porcelain amputee continued unabated. As did his slaving. But a tendency to essay an analysis of his paraphilia – and, I suppose, the more general disaffection revealed by his lamentable manners – was overtaken by the arrival on the green of a stout woman who seemed on terms of more than passing acquaintance with the sickening school of maidenly infatuation that had, by now, lapped the pond, and was again heading my way.

"Fools!" she exclaimed. The company started and then turned to her.

"I beg your pardon?" said one of the bolder girls.

"Fools and blind! The man loves – wildly loves!"

"Reginald? But whom? None of us!"

"No, none of us. His weird fancy has lighted, for the nonce, on the White Lady, Patience!"

"The White Lady? Oh, it cannot be!" they thrilled, in a chorale whose euphony was – due to my own sudden, intense, almost lyrical state of perturbation – lost to me, despite a certain taste I had for young women given to the shameless, stratospheric flights of the coloratura. I got to my feet.

"Madam," I said, engaging the stout one's attention. "May I speak with you?" The woman looked at me a little sharply and then, with that resolve typical of the matronly kind, marched to where I stood. There, with feet planted wide and arms folded across her capacious breasts, she silently dared me to further utterance. "Patience – you have seen her?" I enquired, nervously.

"You are new here, sir?"

"In a manner of speaking. But this White Lady you speak of – how is it that a wraith may enter into association with a human, such as this Reginald Pike?"

She shrugged. "I am not sure. We have all had sightings of Patience, of course. The dead milkmaid is something of a legend. But I affirm that I have seen her and Mr Pike together. Sometimes I use the stables at Castle Thorn to go riding. It agrees with my health. And on more than a few afternoons, after I have returned from a hearty canter, I have seen strange goings-on. Bah! Only yesterday I caught them in the dairy. He was eating fresh butter with a tablespoon. And today they say he is not well!"

"Only yesterday?" Only yesterday, I thought, she had as good as declared my brother her enemy. Why then should she choose to be so intimate? "That's impossible," I concluded. The woman was envious, deluded, perhaps a little mad.

"You are frank, sir. Overly frank, perhaps. After all, we have not yet been introduced!"

"Madam, I fear I am to be forever denied that boon." I turned my back on the garrulous hag and, taking the boy by the arm, began to traverse the green in the direction of the public house.

"It's but a fleeting fancy of his," she called after me. "It will quickly wear away. And then" – and her voice fell to a mellow, if penetrating, whisper – "Oh, Reginald, if you but knew what a wealth of golden love is waiting for you, stored up in this rugged old bosom of mine, the milkmaid's triumph would be short!"

But her lovelorn ramblings had not the power to distract. The church clock had struck the hour. It was opening time.



The Order of the Black Knights was some five centuries old. It had been established in pre-Christian times at the height of the wars with the Netherworld. After the orcs had been driven permanently into their subterranean lairs, and soon after the first missionaries had arrived from the East, those knights whose device had formerly been the Null, the Zero and the Void took vows of poverty and chastity and became the mailed fist of the church militant. They dedicated themselves to securing the king's highways and subduing the marauding bands who wandered the wastes. At last, their military and financial power grew so enormous that they were seen to threaten England's autocracy. Persecution followed. They were accused of blasphemies. Crimes of the spirit and irregularities of the flesh. Many were arrested. Some were hanged. The others, stripped of their status, retreated into the Darkling Isle's wilder counties to offer their services as gentlemen of fortune.

One of their more notorious members had been Richard Pike the First, swordsman *par excellence*, orcslayer of renown and my great-great-great-great-grandfather. The fact that I was something of an honorary member of the Order – if by the most distant of familial ties – and, perhaps more importantly, because I was the elder sibling of this particular detachment's

paymaster, put the captain and I on easy terms. Not that he entertained warm feelings towards Reginald. On the contrary, I discovered that he and his men greatly resented the manner in which the old satyr had the local women at his beck and call. Some of his knights had taken to trumpeting "that Utilitarian nonsense" as he put it, in a vain attempt to regain the ladies' favours. And the gruffness with which he expressed his disdain of stooping to such a course himself came perilously near to a mutinous reproof of his temporal master. I allowed myself a cautious, inward smile. The captain, far from being my brother's uncritical henchman, was, perhaps, an unlooked-for ally.

The strong ale did much to contribute to our ever-increasing bonhomie and, to this effect, I bought round after round, eager to foster, on his part, at least, manifold indiscretions. But try as I might, I could learn little about my brother and the tendencies he had lately revealed towards politico-military adventurism. The captain's attention was all upon the boy.

"Yes indeed," he said, in reply to one my grandson's queries, "our mission is as it has always been: to extirpate the perverse. And so cleanse the planet. New manifestations, such as the Nephilim, have, of late, been our particular focus. But we also actively seek out human recidivists who cling to perverse creeds: those slaves in Mercia and Northumberland, for instance, who refuse to be emancipated, despite the efforts of so many brave men."

I put a hand to my mouth, in imitation of one inspired to meditate upon such a fine encapsulation of high moral purpose. In reality, I strove to hide a smile. The knights would often reveal themselves to be as much mirror images of the vices they deplored as the general public in one of its ridiculous, but, it seemed to me, increasingly rabid, fits of censure. Righteous hatred allowed an indulgence in fantasies and conduct that men like the captain normally would not admit to countenancing. It was a classic case of pointing the finger in order to divert suspicion. "Let those slaves fall to the sword if they cannot walk true," he continued. "Let them go to the grave along with their pox-ridden masters. And let the lime and the worms take all their feeble-minded talk of love, death and transcendence!"

The boy stared past the captain at one of the buxom young serving-maids who carried tankards of foaming ale across the room. Then he sipped at his *cassis à l'eau* and shifted on the rough wooden bench. The hand that he kept upon his lap tightened about the doll. His knuckles whitened.

"The perverse is amongst us," said my grandson. "I see it. I see it everyday. We humans must hunt it down. Hunt it down without mercy!"

The captain beamed with avuncular pride.

"I have heard you have done a pretty thorough job about these parts already," I said, addressing the black knight, but keeping a wary eye on the flushed, overexcited child. "My brother speaks warmly of the way you and your men have sanitized his woods."

"Ah, but it will not be enough," he sighed, the light of zealotry kindling his eyes. "I fear no amount of killing

will be enough. Have you read your Bible of late?"

"Not for some time, I fear," I said, apprehensive of the conversation's somewhat austere change of tack.

"I would refer you to Genesis, chapter six, verses one through four: '*And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, That the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose... There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown.*'"

Pushing aside his tankard, he leaned across the table, tapping the side of his nose with his middle finger. "The passage is, of course, a prophecy concerning the last days. That is, those in which we live. The word that is translated 'giant' is, in Hebrew, 'Nephilim,' which means 'those who fell, or the fallen ones.' These Nephilim: they are fallen angels, the same rebel *ben Elohim* whose self-imploded universe – parallel, but quite alien to our own – infected Earth with the soul-particles to which we may trace the original contamination of the human race some four-and-a-half thousand years ago. These creatures that haunt our reborn forests, whether physical or immaterial, represent a final attempt by evil spirits from beyond the confines of our own space and time to colonize us!"

I found myself studying the broken network of capillaries that lined the captain's cheeks, their disconnectedness symbolic, somehow, of my own fragmented understanding of the past. And not merely of the collective past, but the personal, too. Ever since Patience had died a discord as profound as that of the Dark Ages had divided me from myself. And it often seemed that only the faint echo of ancient song kept me sane. But my aestheticism had failed me. Like other men, I had become unreal; unreal without being fictive. And in despair I sometimes felt that my jangling, off-key life would be resolved only if I acknowledged defeat and followed mankind into the blessed anonymity of history's aether.

I looked down into my tankard and forced myself to reply, knowing that if I did not re-engage with the world, then I might simply fade away. "I always thought," I said, "that the tribes of the perverse had died out, become extinct, as eventually do all forms of life. Only the orcs are still with us, they say. But buried underground, in their Netherworld haunts, there to languish until the end. The Nephilim seem to represent something else entirely. Something new."

"You are wrong! The perverse lives!" he replied quickly. "It is manifest! It is everywhere! It seeks to merge with and corrupt the bloodline of Adam! Because of God's promise to send a redeemer through the first man's kin! By such corruption, it seeks to prevent the Second Coming of Our Lord, Jesus Christ!"

He slapped the tabletop with the flat of his hand. His eyes shone not only with zeal, but with the mad, libidinous fire of the tribes, orcs, half-men and slaves who had roamed the Earth during the Dark Ages. For mankind was all that was left of the perverse. That we too would



soon pass from the world was, I knew, a blessing. "The boy is indeed right," the captain continued. "The perverse is amongst us. But Christ is coming, mark my words. And he will come with a sword. Let there be on that day an end to all flesh and a resurrection of the spirit of Man! *'And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the Earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth...'*"

"Yes!" piped the boy, his eyes grown large. "It must all end in the great death! The great consummation! The marriage of above and below!"

The captain grinned and tousled the boy's hair. "I like this one, indeed I do. Would you like to be a black knight, young Richard? Would you care to dedicate yourself to the extermination of the Nephilim? If so, be warned. We have only seen their shadow. There will be ones to come greater than any man can comprehend. Angel-demons, terrible and beautiful. But we will fight them unto the very last, will we not, boy? We will not submit!" And he gave the boy's hair such a roisterous tug that I thought he would part scalp him. "God damn, but he's a pleasant rascal!"

My suspicions of the captain vanished as of that moment. This black knight did not seem capable of much duplicity; his fanaticism would not have allowed it. Reginald, I decided, was acting alone. Or at least, without benefit of counsel. But why, I wondered, had he suggested this meeting? Perhaps simply to get the boy and me out of the castle grounds so that he might conduct certain business in private.

An assignation with Patience, perhaps...

If I were to test the supposition I knew I would have to disencumber myself of the boy's company.

"Would you, perhaps, show him round your garrison, captain? I'm sure Richard would be most interested to hear you recount more of your life and work."

Though I believed the captain to harbour no ill intentions towards the boy the stratagem, of course, was still rash. But the sudden urgency I felt to return to Castle Thorn and have it out with my brother overrode all sense of prudence. The boy's fidgeting grew colossal. He pulled at the doll's hair and twisted its violated limbs. And then a sound, that was almost like a dog's whimpering, emerged from behind his thin, blood-drained lips.

"Really, grandfather? May I?"

It was the only time, in our short re-acquaintance, that his moody truculence had given way to a rudimentary state of courtesy.

"I'd be very happy to show him all there is!" interjected the captain. "Most happy!"

And so I left them, the captain quaffing his ale, the boy playing with his *cassis*, each finding in the other's company a measure of familial contentment greater than any I or my brother, or perhaps any other human, could provide.

Reginald called the trees that formed the avenue leading to Castle Thorn's front door cherry-trees, but their resemblance to the few examples of that genus that had survived the mutative incursions of the Netherworld was cursory. Carmine of bole, bough and berry – a garishness that brought to mind a kind of vegetable maquillage – and festooned with lanterns, these fantastically clipped whores of the new parturition cast their topiarian shadows before my feet, as if soliciting me to enter their embrace. Oblivious to their painted charms, I stepped over the outlines of heraldic beasts and the chimeric shapes of some of the more familiar Nephilim, and proceeded towards the castle.

The evening was close. The castle's grey coping seemed to deliquesce into the ashy light. But though indistinct, the windows of the dining room had been clearly flung wide open, the early evening air so still that I could hear cutlery being set upon the table preparatory to my return. As I approached I heard another sound, less distinct, but so insistent, that I came to a stop and strained to identify its nature and the direction from which it came.

The sound was like that of a steam, or perhaps even petrol, engine – a low, deep-throated rumble – and it seemed to owe its origin to the dairy. Immediately I recalled the details of what the village matron had said regarding the supposed tryst between my brother and Patience – "*Only yesterday I caught them in the dairy*" – a tryst that put an ambiguous gloss on the evil events of the small hours. Was the ghost I had encountered in the forest truly the shade of my long-dead love, or some piece of diabolic stage machinery, trumped up by God knows whom? I determined to investigate, a sliver of jealous rage such as I had not felt for over 50 years – its ridiculous inappropriateness unable to dull its force – pinking at my heart.

I left the path and moved across the lawn as silently as I was able, trusting to the deeper shadows that lay hereabouts to conceal my progress.

The dairy was a comparatively small building, no more than a commodious shed, really, that my brother had had erected in order to conduct his experiments in automated farming. But it was, I knew, equipped with the latest electrical lights. Therefore I was surprised – the surprise swiftly translating itself into foreboding – to discover that the only illumination it boasted at present was the flickering that one associates with a taper.

Something clandestine was afoot.

I drew up to the door. It was ajar, a crack of feeble light allowing me to squint inside. And though the interior of the dairy was correspondingly dim, the sight that I was met with was infused with such a blaze of depravity that I involuntarily held up a hand to shield my eyes, blinded in equal measures by disgust, horror and recognition.

Half woman, half animal, the sphinx lay on an oriental mat, its chin upon the ground, its hindquarters raised into the air. My brother coupled with it, one hand sunk deep into the fur of the lustrous flanks, the other stroking the throat, then moving down the lynx-spotted body. Both man and chimera glistened, as if with the dew of night



and death. And as my brother undulated his hips in sensual communion his leman purred, filling the air with that rasping sound that I had confused with some mechanical device. Tail coiled about human thigh. Then ears flicked, as if at a passing insect.

The sphinx turned its head towards the door.

Black satin eyes fell upon me. The eyes hardened, leered, became like polished jet. Then burst into flames.

I prepared to flee. But as I went to step backwards something emerged from the shadows that held me to the spot. Near where sphinx and human enjoyed unnatural congress was a woman. And yet not a woman, for she was, I knew, as unnatural, in her own way, as the therianthrope monstrosity on the mat; as unnatural as my brother.

Patience.

All eyes were upon me now. The hot eyes of the sphinx, heavy with a surfeit of pleasure, those of Patience – like fantastic moons shivering in some stagnant lake – and my brother's own, clouded, mad. The old rakehell spasmed, cried out, his hands tearing at flesh and fur; the sphinx emitted a shriek. And then man and beast fell apart, and the sweat-slicked body of Reginald Pike lay supine upon the mat, his ribcage shaking with convulsive laughter.

The sphinx fawned at his feet then came to rest with its head upon his knee, stretched laterally to the pale exclamation mark of his head and torso. It extended its tongue and ran it lazily about its lips. And all the while, its eyes never left me.

With a small creak, befitting a modestly haunted house, the door opened, exposing me to full view. Patience stood on the threshold.

"Come in, Ritchie," she said, her voice soft and sad. "Come in, and let us resolve matters once and for all. I have an itch to return to eternity."

I entered. If it had not been for the two Nephilim in whose presence I stood, one, if not consciously malign, then possessed, I would have supposed, of an appropriately savage animality, the other – my own Patience – translated by all that had transpired into an unknown, equally alien, and perhaps far more dangerous quantity, then I would have walked up to Reginald, slapped his face, and demanded an explanation for all that had passed since I had arrived at Castle Thorn little more than 24 hours ago. As it was, what with the sphinx greeting my approach with an ominous growl, and the gossamer-like, if strangely corporeal sensation of Patience's hand upon my forearm, I restrained myself, bit my tongue and swallowed the strong, nay, almost poetic language of reproach that had risen into my mouth like a haemoptysis of my very genius. It little mattered. I believe my thunderous visage said it all.

"I really hadn't expected such a display of mulish distemper from *you*, Ritchie," my brother said.

"I want to know everything," I replied, as dispassionately as I could. "About your intentions regarding the title. And your homicidal intentions towards the boy. And, and –" I desisted before the apoplexy I heard knocking on the door of my skull made good its threat to make my acquaintance.

"And why I have a yen to copulate with the beasts of the field?" My brother smiled, playfully tugging at the sphinx's amber hackles. "Pleasure is all, Ritchie. Pleasure is all."

"The black knights," said Patience, "could not kill *all* the chimeras that live in these parts. And so it is that over the last few months I have been able to present your brother with certain gifts in lieu of myself. But that is all over. Tonight I am promised to him. I must, it seems, become his final, most absolute pleasure. The one he says will blot out what has until now been an immitigable pain."

"Promised? But what you said yesterday, in the forest –"

I turned my back on her. And not only because of the heartbreak that she had once again occasioned, this time from the other side of the grave, but because I felt I simply could not risk taking my gaze off the sphinx.

"Ah yes," she said, "of all my gifts, it is the sphinx that he loves the most. A sphinx couchant is, after all, part of your coat of arms, is it not? I think it satisfies his vanity, for he really does mean to become Lord Soho."

"She gave it to me when news arrived of your son's death," said my brother, slurring a little, as if with the intoxication of victory. "She made me swear not to hurt the boy!" He again fell to emitting wild peals of laughter.

"But he wanted more," said Patience. "He always wants more. And tonight I have promised the last thing I have to give. Love must be unselfish, must it not? Please, try to understand. What I do I do for little Ritchie."

"Because *I* have failed," I said, miserably. "Because I will always fail."

"Because you are Ideal, Ritchie," she said. "It was wrong of me to ask for your help. You are not meant for this world." Her voice grew strained, brittle. "It does not matter. Reggie has agreed to let your grandson live."

I ground my teeth so hard that the cattle stirred in their pens and began a sullen lowing.

"I can't allow myself to hope that he may be otherwise appeased," Patience continued. "Not after last night. Not after I discovered that I had inadvertently provided him with the very means to *destroy* the child."

I shook my head furiously. "Don't do it. He's not a man of his word. You must see that, for God's sake." I held my arms at my sides, my big, stooped form bloated with such despair that it seemed to me that I filled half the dairy. Then, as my despair increased and my bulk seemed to expand the more, with several buttons of my waistcoat set to pop, I felt the void surrender to my mass. Despair was all. And yet it was at that very moment of utter hopelessness that I found the strength to fight back.

I concentrated upon Reginald. "Modern thought is distinguished from ancient by its cultivation of the relative spirit in place of the absolute. But I am not a modern. I am a man, as you have so rightly intuited, who owes his allegiance to the past. I do not believe, as you do, brother, that good may result from mere expedience. No; your philosophy is a mask under which hides the face of a jackal." I swung about. My dead sweetheart looked upon me wonderingly. "I believe in absolutes, Patience. In absolute val-



ues. Give the boy into my charge. Trust me. *I will* protect him with my life. I swear it."

I am not sure what had prompted me to make such a declaration towards a child that, until then, I had longed to be rid of. Perhaps it was the thought of losing Patience again, if not to the grave, then to another, infinitely more sinister death. The death that was modernity, the shoddy, mean-spiritedness of an age I had spent my life trying to escape from.

But escape was no longer an option.

My brother grinned, mockingly. "Ah," he gasped, "you and your absolutes, Ritchie." He rolled onto his side, and, propping his head with a hand, gazed up at Patience. "Listen: rights, human or otherwise, are the result of law; from real law come real rights; but from imaginary laws, such as he – damned unacknowledged legislator that he is – from law of imagination come imaginary rights! He cannot protect you, my dear. Only I can."

"Am I to be your pet then, Reggie?" she said. "The last survivor of the Nephilim, protected by Reginald Pike's laws? You tried to kill me –"

"Yes, because I loved you!"

"Ha!" I exploded. "Love?"

"She was always a danger," he said, as he disentangled himself from the sphinx and hauled himself languidly into a sitting position. He stared at me from behind a lank of disordered hair. "A danger to me. And to you, Ritchie. She was always the one who would destroy us. Look what she did to us when she was merely human! And now her power is such that to love her is to risk losing the world."

"It was always so," I said.

"And we have always been her slaves. Slaves to the past! But if I cannot kill her, then I will make her *my* slave." He looked Patience keenly in the eye. "If you become my bride, I shall ensure that the Nephilim are granted the right to exist."

I too turned to address Patience. "Right to exist? He'll enslave you all. And the ones that offer resistance will be hunted down by his black knights." I swung about. "Isn't that so, Reggie?"

"Oh, why don't you leave well alone. You are committed to your aestheticism, are you not? Go back to your cloisters and books."

"My aestheticism? I'll renounce it. Become an ordinary man. Ordinary enough, at least, to acquit myself of the responsibilities of a guardian to my grandson."

He broke into such a fit of cachinnation as put his post-coital laughter to shame.

"Anything to best me, eh, Ritchie? You're as much a sham as I am."

Patience darted to my side. "If you are sincere, Ritchie," she said. "If you are *truly* sincere, then –"

My brother's laughter subsided. His brow corrugated with calculation, but also, I was pleased to note, a little fear.

"I hope you are not going back on your bargain, my precious. Your powers are confined to the forest. You cannot resort to bedevilment here. But my lovely pet Mitsou" – the sphinx put its head in his lap and rolled its head

appreciatively – "could, contrariwise, tear you limb from limb. That is, if you persist in assuming that pretty, fleshly shape."

She put herself between me and my brother. Glancing over her shoulder she met my eyes. "Ritchie?"

"I mean it, Patience. I will do as you bid. I will be the servant of the Nephilim. I swear it!"

"Ha!" cried my brother. "Do you think the two of you can play such games with impunity!"

"Ritchie, listen," said Patience. "The Pikes are a line of great swordsmen, are they not?"

"That was a long time ago," I said. "All that is lost, along with our sword, *Espiritu Santo*."

"But the sword lives. Inside you. I can sense it, Ritchie. I have few powers when I am away from the woodlands. But I know I have the power to look into your heart and awaken your spirit!"

She placed her hand on my chest. Its warmth transfused itself through the linen shirt and found its way deep, deep, into my essence. "You have no blade within reach, Ritchie. Nor would you know how to use one. Your sword has always been language. Words. Cutting words –"

"Words," my brother muttered, getting to his feet, "words, words, words, words, words. Bah! Kill him, Mitsou."

Unhurriedly, the sphinx rose, extended its forepaws, stretched – the lordotic arch of its back, perhaps, a gesture of submission towards its master as much as a self-pleasuring indulgence in feline calisthenics – and then, with an easy cruelty of gait, padded towards me, its black eyes brimful with malevolence.

Unbidden, the words came:

Come forth my lovely seneschal,  
So somnolent, so statuesque,  
Come forth you exquisite grotesque,  
Half woman and half animal,

Come forth my lovely languorous Sphinx,  
And put your head upon my knee  
And let me stroke your throat and see  
Your body spotted like the Lynx,

And let me touch those curving claws  
Of yellow ivory, and grasp  
The tail that like a monstrous Asp  
Coils round your heavy velvet paws.

The chimera nudged its cheek against my thigh, looked up and uttered a deep-throated rumble of meekness and tractability.

"You've, you've –" My brother stamped his foot upon the ground. "Oh, you've turned my lovely Mitsou into a contemptible little *kitten*!" And then he shook his fist, first at me, then at his wayward betrothed. "It seems you do have a spell or two up your sleeve, my dear," he added, testily. His frown compressed the more, the corrugations indicative of maturing violence. "Ritchie has been one of those poets who affect a morbid deviation from the healthy forms of life. His work has been characterized by a weary, wasting sensuality; nothing virile, nothing ten-

der, nothing completely sane; a superfluity of extreme sensibility. With your assistance, he might be able to charm a chimera, but I assure you his paltry effusions will have no effect on *me*."

"Oh really, Reggie" – and I threw back my head – "I cannot be moved by such cheap hack sentiments. Except, of course, if it be to scorn."

"Focus," said Patience, close to my ear. "Hone your words. Make every utterance razor-sharp. Make your words *cut*."

"There's nothing *you* can teach me, Ritchie," said my brother. It seemed his arrogance was such that he disdained to further defend himself.

"Literature can teach you, Reggie. Teach you a damn good lesson. Not by explicit preachment, not by express intent – as you would have it in your vulgar new world – but by *being*."

My brother let out a sharp cry and put his hand to his cheek. When he took it away, a long, thin gash was revealed, as if from a riding crop. He looked down at his bloodstained hand, his eyes wide with astonishment.

"Patience," he said, fighting for his breath, "stop this – stop this this *instant!*"

I knew I had to press home the advantage. "The poet is a godlike creator of new orders of being," I ventured. "He is the proclaimer of new values, of new kinds of humanity."

"No!" my brother screamed. He flinched, then doubled over, another wound manifesting itself across the opposite cheek.

"Morality is nothing without imagination, Reggie."

My brother straightened himself and attempted to parry. "Imagination without morality is a riderless carriage, out of control!"

"Control, ah yes –"

"Art," he said, stuttering in his haste to summon up the requisite verbal fizz, "art must be the handmaiden of morality!"

"And whose morality might that be, Reggie? Yours? *The greatest happiness of the greatest number*? I despise your good. I despise your happiness. Your high moral purpose is the same as that of the black knights: a feint, a veneer, a convenient piece of tokenism to convince the world that you are not perverse." I glanced at the sphinx. It crouched at my feet, its eyes balefully fixed upon my brother. I went down on one knee and tickled it behind its ear. "But we are all perverse, Reggie. Humanity carries the taint of the Dark Ages in its collective veins. How could it be otherwise after so many millennia of miscegenation? If the Darkling Isle ever comes to accept your philosophy, it will be only to mask its vices, as you mask your own. Humanity is corrupt. Doomed. The mirror image of a diseased past. And that corruption will out, despite our lip service to freedom and egalitarianism. All shall be revealed for what it is, Reggie, just as tonight you have been revealed. And then humanity – dissolute, murderous, depraved humanity – shall pass away and be replaced by its successors." The sphinx emitted a low growl and pawed at the floorboards. "Morality, Reggie? Your morality is that of the most desperate of hypocrites."

My brother had wrapped his arms about his chest. He writhed on the spot in agony. "And your precious imagination: is it not as desperate as me? Does not your goblin blood cry out for fulfilment? Are you not a hypocrite too?"

"Imagination? The extra-textual world will soon vanish. As unreal as the human race. For the Nephilim are coming, and mankind has had its day. If I am desperate, I am desperate to leave this world, Reggie, not to hang on to it, like you. Attune yourself. Listen to the song that will soon be all we have left of ourselves. Become one with it and work out your deliverance. For the grand opera is soon to reach its finale. And the only thing left of us will be our fictiveness. Yes, our *imagination*."

He chewed at his lower lip. Blood dribbled from his nose and ears. And then his red, hangdog eyes became those of a cornered animal. "Take care!" he fairly barked. "When I am thwarted I am very terrible!"

"Of course you are, Reggie," I said, ignoring him and turning to look up at Patience. "But I say again: I am prepared to renounce my aesthetic quest. For your sake, I am prepared to enter the world."

My dead love knelt down by my side. "You really will become commonplace, Ritchie?"

"I'll acquit myself of my responsibilities towards the boy, yes," I said.

Her hand dipped into the chimera's fur and closed over my own. "I love you, Ritchie. But then I have always loved you. What you do, this sacrifice of yours – ah, it is something the Nephilim will never forget."

"I don't think," my brother said, somewhat more quietly now, "that you quite appreciate the consequences of thwarting me."

I studied my brother's bleeding face, reluctant to press home. For, with Patience's declaration of love, it seemed that our duel – which we had been fighting, in one way or another, ever since we had been boys – was effectively at an end. Suddenly, his eyes became hooded, almost rapt, so that he seemed one of Christendom's less celebrated martyrs, Reginald, patron saint of cunning, perhaps. His throat contracted in a dry swallow. He moistened his lips. And I knew at once that our logomachy was about to become a death struggle.

"Suppose," he said, "suppose – I won't go so far as to say that I will do it – but suppose for one moment I were to *curse* you? It would be an extreme measure, no doubt. Still –"

"Don't do it, Reggie," said Patience.

"I can be as cutting as my elder brother, my dear, believe me. No one has ever accused Reginald Pike of being at a loss for a few sharp words!"

"No, Reggie," she said, "it's over – you don't understand!"

"Listen to her, Reggie. The poetry of the *fleshly* belongs to the Nephilim, like the rest of the material world. Don't overreach yourself."

But he was unwilling to heed us. "I curse you, Ritchie," he began, "I curse you in the name of the very goblinry we both carry in our veins. May you always be sequestered amongst your books, alone, without affection, devoid of the small comforts of the vernacular world. May you never know connection with another human soul."

May you never know the peace you yearn for. May you die alone, without hope, and may the damnable Ideal that you say will provide refuge for your soul disclose itself to be metaphysical gibberish. May you and Patience dwell forever apart. May that horrible grandson of yours torment you even upon your deathbed. May the curse of the Pikes take the little rotter to exile and perdition as it did the first of our line. And may you both –

By now, my brother bled from so many self-inflicted wounds that he was too weak to continue. He took a few uncertain steps forward and then dropped to his knees.

And sensing its opportunity, the sphinx leapt from my grasp. Falling upon its erstwhile master, it knocked him backwards, its lips immediately seizing his own in a greedy, sucking kiss, its claws tearing at chest, ribs, hips and thighs so frenziedly that, within the interval it took for me to bound across the dairy and bring the impetuous creature to heel, my brother was no more than blood and bone.



I shook hands with the captain and then, less enthusiastically, with my grandson.

"You shall go to school, here, then, with the Order," I reiterated, to make sure that he understood the nature of our contract, and that I would not have him turning up at my rooms at Christ Church until the Christmas holidays, "and I will pay your board and keep until such time as you decide upon a career."

"I have decided," said the boy, calmly. His uniform – leather hose and doublet adorned with various fetishistic regalia and surmounted by a very conspicuous codpiece – was a miniature version of the captain's. It was also an unacknowledged homage to the psychic lumber all of us – but he, of course, more than most – carried about as a reminder of our schismatic racial past. But if my grandson did not, or could not, own to his own perversity, then he was at least amongst others of his kind. The Order, despite all that I might offer, or do, would constitute the child's only real home. "I want to be like the captain," he explained. "And I want to travel to the East, to redeem our lineage from the mire. I want to regain the family title, if not for myself, then for my descendants!"

Responsibility? Someone once said it is better to be irresponsible and right than to be responsible and wrong.

I awarded them each a curt nod and then left them.



The glade was as I had seen it before. Patience was waiting for me. Today, however, she was sans cow, as if that prop was supererogatory now that I had accepted her terms and surrendered, of my own free will, to the rough, bovine world.

I released the sphinx from its leash. It waited a moment, unsure of its freedom, and then gambolled across the glade to disappear in the encircling trees.

"You're wearing a tweed suit, Ritchie," she said, her smile dimpling her plump left cheek.

"It is as I have promised," I said. "I am determined to become commonplace."

"And the boy?"

I gazed round; pursed my lips. "The boy? Oh, he's all right."

"You *will* take care of him, Ritchie?"

"As much as I am able, Patience. I grow old. And the boy is... strange. No matter. My conversation, you may be assured, will henceforth be perfectly matter-of-fact. I will cut my hair, and have a back parting. I will be steady and stolid. And if there remains in me anything aesthetic, then it will be an aestheticism of the most pastoral kind." I sighed, deeply, in a last concession to histrionics. "Yes, I will indeed attempt to become the most *ordinary* of mortals."

"Don't worry about being *too* commonplace," she said. "Be assured: the boy's fate will be *extraordinary*."

About me, the silence deepened.

"Is the world really to end?" I said.

"Your world, Ritchie. Aestheticism and morality are obsolete. Pleasure and pain – how could you and Reggie argue about such things? Little Ritchie knows better. Pleasure and pain, he says, are one. He will be the worst of your line, yet the one who will paradoxically revive it. And his son will sire the Nephilim's saviour." She smiled. "Something new is coming. Something transcendent."

"Transcendent," I said, softly. "I am glad to hear it. I tire of history. Its repetitions. Its subverted song."

She began to glow. At first, she seemed the girl I had known during my childhood and early youth, my madonna of the forest. I began to intone:

A lily-girl, not made for this world's pain,  
With brown, soft hair close braided by her ears,  
And longing eyes half veiled by slumberous tears  
Like bluest water seen through mists of rain:  
Pale cheeks whereon no love hath seen its stain,  
Red underlip drawn in for fear of love,  
And white throat, whiter than the silvered dove,  
Through whose wan marble creeps one purple vein...

Then her aspect changed and she assumed the appearance of the girl she had been just before she had died, her face pale and covered in lesions. The fire of holy immance burned away that pain. And finally, I saw her true self. An ultimate transfiguration that was both more terrible, and more wonderful than any vision I had ever been granted by poetry, music or art. For before me stood an angel-demon. Uncreated light. A hard, gem-like flame that pierced my soul with the same angelic spear that had wounded St Teresa. Consciousness without an object, or indeed, a subject. The bedrock of everything.

The veil was rent. Leaving this world, she dissolved into the Ideal.

I put my hand out, seeking to touch the still faint afterglow of her image. And in the southing, fervent trees I heard the words: "You cannot go where I go, Richard. No human can." The contorted limbs of the new parturition



fanned themselves and groped towards the sky. The evanescence receded. And the veil was again drawn over eternity and its vast, empty spaces of Love.

The days of normative existence were over. The schismatic life forms of hell and heaven, of the Netherworld and Earth-Above, would herald a new Earth. A dream Earth, where intelligible structure would burn away its material bonds, to reveal a spiritual reality independent of this world.

I stood alone. Again, the forest had begun to make its sibilant call, urging me to depart and not to tarry. To re-enter all that was fallen and corrupt.

I was commonplace. I had always been commonplace. It was only the Nephilim who were extraordinary. Their destiny was unimaginable. I belonged to the past.

*L'art pour l'art?* I had always believed that art must lead *somewhere*. But now I knew it was a somewhere I was to be denied. Knew it as surely as I had known my brother's philosophy to be a political sop for the masses. An illusion, like happiness itself.

Richard Calder's seven novels (with an eighth, *Impakto*, forthcoming) have built him ■ considerable reputation over the past decade. The above is the fourth in his ongoing "Lord Soho" series of stories (see *Interzone* issues 154, 159 and 161 for the earlier episodes). Each is set in the same far-future world, but takes place ■ couple of generations after the preceding tale.



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# Lost CONTINENT

*Stephen Baxter*

Without warning Dorehill leaned across the table. “Close your eyes.”

I was startled into obeying.

“Don’t think before replying. *Tell me who you are.*”

And, just for a second or two, nothing came. It was as if I was drifting in a fog. Who am I? Where am I from? How did I get here?

The answers quickly loomed out of that pearly fog. I saw my own face, at age six and 16 and 36; my parents, our somewhat dilapidated family house in Nantucket; my study, my books; Mary’s sweet face, the kids, our home here in Tangier. It all came together, a mosaic of images, a tidy narrative.

*Too tidy? Was that Dorehill’s point?*

He was watching me, those desperate eyes bright. “You see? You *see*? How do you know your past is real? How do you *know* that everything you think you remember wasn’t conjured into existence a couple of seconds ago, knitted into place for you, a – a tapestry to cover up the holes in the wall? Don’t you think it’s at least *possible*?...”

It had been nearly 20 years since I had last seen Peter Dorehill, at our graduation together. Now, in the cool brightness of a café on Tangier’s beach promenade, we

sipped mint tea and appraised each other, as old acquaintances will.

The years had made Dorehill gaunt, as if the softer parts of his personality had worn away. I had soon learned he was still full of words, words, words, just as he always had been. But I detected something in his eyes, about his stance, as if he was wound up to explosive tension.

Knowing his history, I thought I recognized the signs. It seemed to me he looked – as my father used to say of my uncle – “white-knuckle sober.” Perhaps he was finding Islamic Morocco trying.

But, intense or not, I could see no chain of reasoning, no string of words which might lure a man like Peter Dorehill into the murky solipsistic waters of Lost Continent mythmaking.

“It began with geology,” he told me. “My chosen profession after Stanford, if you remember. Three decades ago – in October 1962 – savage earth tremors were experienced around a great half-ring of land, from Scandinavia, down through the Russian ports of Leningrad and Lvov and Odessa, on through Alexandria and the north African coast – even as far as Tangier, where we sit. Many of these quakes were in regions far from any geological fault. All of them occurred within minutes of each

other. And at the same time, tsunamis marched across the Atlantic to smash against the east coast of America.”

I nodded. I remembered all this, of course; we had both been ten years old at the time. “And this is what you have been working on.”

“Not exactly.” He grinned, rueful. “You know me, John: an unanswered question is an endless, nagging irritation. I’ve always been fascinated by the puzzle of that sudden chthonic jolt. How did it happen? Why *then*, and in those specific sites? What could have triggered it all? And so on.

“But, after taking my master’s, I found that *nobody* was working seriously on the problem. This was just a dozen or so years after the event, remember. Oh, the geological records were there to inspect – there had been no fast answers; there was still work to be done – but even so, it struck me that people had turned away from the mystery, had lost interest. I couldn’t understand it. But I got nowhere fast. Forced to earn a crust, I took a job with an oil company.”

“But you kept digging.”

“You see, you do know me! I wondered if it might be fruitful to look a little wider. I wanted to know what else was going on in that autumn of 1962.”

I said dryly, “I seem to remember that the news of the period was somewhat dominated by missiles in Cuba.”

He smiled and pushed back a straggling grey hair from his startlingly high forehead. (Why are we always so shocked by the ageing of friends from youth?) “Correct – and maybe significant. In that month virtually every commentator was predicting nuclear war – a war which was averted only by some adroit diplomacy, and a large pinch of luck. But I went further than that. I looked at trends in other disciplines – such as yours, John. I consulted newspaper records. I even dug around in the drug store tabloids.”

“What were you looking for?”

“I didn’t know – I suspected I wouldn’t know until I found it. I sensed a pattern, out there somewhere... It’s hard to be more clear than that. All I did find were more unanswered questions. For instance there was a rash of stories of UFO visitations and alien abductions.”

“Peter, there are always UFO stories –”

“Not in such numbers, and with such consistency. Anyhow there’s more – much of which ought to interest a historian like yourself, John.”

My smile froze a little at that, but I kept listening.

With diligent (if probably amateurish) research he had, he claimed, uncovered clusters of new folk tales.

“Shiite imams in Algeria told me how the Trumpet of Israfil sounded over the northern ocean – how Iblis, Satan, rose and resumed his defiance of God’s great command: *Be*. The Orthodox Christians of the Russian coast spoke of a recent return by Satan, who they call the Murderer of the Beginning. Even modern practitioners of the old Norse religions whispered stories of an irruption of *Ginnungagap*, the primeval void, into the modern world.

“These fragmentary tales were expressed in the differing mythic structures of local populations. But they were all alike. And I found them scattered in a great circle, running along the North African coast, through the

Middle East and Russia, as far as Scandinavia.”

I said reluctantly, “The same as the 1962 quake arc.”

His eyes gleamed. “You see the pattern. I felt I was skirting some enormous, hidden event, revealed not so much by evidence as by a notable absence. *I believe these tales are fragments of recollection* – smashed, scattered, broken – like the ring of debris that surrounds an impact crater.” He eyed me. “You think I’m babbling.”

I forced a smile. “Peter, I’m making no judgement.” But in fact my heart was sinking.

Because we had already moved from geology to myth-making, and I suspected I was about to be introduced to his Lost Continent theory.

I suppose I felt a lingering fondness for Dorehill. I hadn’t forgotten Stanford and our late night bull sessions, fuelled by bad food, whisky, dope and fellowship, when we had talked about anything and everything.

Aliens, for instance – or the lack thereof, a favourite bullshit topic.

*Where is everybody?* Peter would ask, lecturing as usual, younger, wispy-bearded, hairier, almost as intense. *Why isn’t there evidence of extraterrestrial civilization all around us? Of course the universe is a big place. But it’s not that big. In fact it’s older than it’s big. They should be here by now. Even if They are long gone, surely we should see Their mighty ruins all around us...*

Perhaps we were being anthropomorphic, we would say. Perhaps They were nothing like us – not recognizable as life forms at all – or perhaps They were pursuing projects we can’t even imagine. But even if we had no idea what Their great structures are for, we would surely recognize them as artificial. And so on.

But it was always Peter who came up with the wackiest notions. *They might simply be invisible. The physicists talk of mirror matter, of an elusive unseen twin for every particle in nature. Are there mirror stars? Are there planets inhabited by mirror organisms, invisible to our senses? Do Their ships of mirror matter slide through our Solar System even now?... It looked as if he hadn’t changed.*

But I had. College was long ago and far away, an intense confinement where seeming friendships could be forged between basically incompatible types, friendships that fell apart pretty rapidly once we were all let out into the real world. I had kept in touch with few of my friends and acquaintances from those days – and certainly not Peter Dorehill.

So it was guilt as much as friendship, I guess, that kept me in my seat in that sunlit café.

It was still harmless enough. We talked around the parameters of the mythos: of tales of rich island-nations whose powerful conquering princes became wicked and impious, until their lands were swallowed up by the sea.

The conventional explanation of Lost Continent myths is well known. Almost certainly, if there is anything in such legends at all, they stem from real events – volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, tsunamis and the like – enough to shatter civilizations. Such half-memories are handed down through the ages, mutating and elaborating as they go. In



later times, efforts are often made to identify the wonderful land with an actual country, to no avail, of course.

All of which is a rational, logical justification of the archetypal legends, deriving from a very human reaction to devastating, barely comprehended events.

But Peter Dorehill had another explanation.

He closed his eyes. "Imagine a great and ancient civilization. Its territories are encrusted with fine buildings, works of art, libraries full of learning.

"And now, imagine a race of beings. Beings from another world."

Though I kept carefully still, he sensed my reaction. His eyes snapped open like camera shutters.

"This is an outrageous hypothesis," he said. "There's no easy way to express it. Just hear me out. You always were a good listener, John. And as you listen, try to imagine how you would prove me wrong."

"Aliens," I prompted. "Extraterrestrials."

"Yes. They have powers and ambitions, perhaps, far beyond human imagining – and yet They are aesthetes who share some of our own conceptions of beauty. In particular, They take great pleasure in the ancient glories of this old country.

"But now They see that it is all soon to be destroyed. Perhaps it will be devastated by some natural disaster, a volcanic eruption, a quake or a flood. Or perhaps it is threatened by humanity – by war, or the collapse of empire. The specifics do not matter. What does matter is what They do about it.

"They come to a decision.

"It is an operation as simple and delicate as removing a prized vase from the grasp of a foolish child. *They carefully detach the old country from the Earth*, and remove it and its treasures to – another place, a museum perhaps, safe from humanity and the vagaries of our untamed planet.

"But They face a dilemma. They will not submit Earth's inhabitants to the trauma of such a display of power. The operation has to be performed stealthily."

I raised an eyebrow at that. "*Stealthily?*"

"What a tremendous, monstrous act! They must distort all records mentioning, however obliquely, the lost lands. Histories have to be truncated and rewritten – They must force entire cultures to forget their roots – They have to suppress our very memories of the place.

"The operation itself is a – a cauterization. But it is hardly clean. Nothing is without flaw, in our mortal universe... As the amputation is made, just as the Earth shudders, so the mass psyche reacts. We are bereft, and we seek expression."

"Ah. Hence the volcanism and so forth associated with such events. They are a consequence, not a cause."

"Yes –"

"And hence the Lost Continent legends."

"Yes. Hence the legends. *They are memories*, you see – half-erased, inchoate, seeking expression..."

As kindly as I could, I pointed out, "But you have no proof."

"It is in the nature of the event itself that proof is erased."

"Then the whole thing's circular."

"Yes," he said, with a kind of strained patience. "Of course that's true. But that doesn't make it wrong, does it? And think about it. How would it be to live through such an event, to witness such a – a miracle? Would we even be able to perceive it? We evolved as plain-dwelling hunter-gatherers, and our sensoriums are conditioned to the hundred-mile scale of Earth landscapes. And if we aren't programmed to register something, we simply don't see it..."

And on, and on.

I was growing irritated, and not a little bored.

Although I couldn't quite see where 1962 fit into all this, I had heard Dorehill's "theory" before – versions of it anyhow. As a professional historian I am pestered by believers in such tales – which often allow the marvellous inhabitants of the lost lands to live on, at the Earth's poles or under the sea, casually meddling with history – tales usually embroidered with "proof" concerning Aboriginal art or the building of South American temples – and all these believers are more or less like Dorehill: each obsessed with a single idea, seeing nothing of the greater themes of history, vague about or even ignorant of the meaning of *evidence* and *proof*.

Dorehill's was indeed a circular argument, his "evidence" nothing but a check of internal consistency. Like most such fantastic notions his claims could never be verified or debunked, for they made no predictions which could be tested against fresh data. I imagined him hawking his notions around the academic community, gradually losing whatever reputation he once had, relying on favours and debts even to get a hearing. And now he had come to me.

But he saw my scepticism, and anger flared in his eyes, startling me.

"Okay, forget the UFOs and fairy tales," he snapped. "Let's talk about the blindness in your own speciality."

I prickled. "What do you mean by that?"

"What would you say is the most fundamental question facing modern historians?"

"I have a feeling you're going to tell me."

"*The emergence question*. Consider the history of America. Quite suddenly, in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, you have the arrival of new populations around the coastal fringes of both northern and southern continents – English-speakers in Newfoundland and Virginia, French in Canada, Spanish in Mexico, Portuguese in South America – as if from nowhere, in a moment of historical time, with distinctive skin colours, cultures, technology, blood types, even different DNA signatures."

I shrugged. "*Arrival* surely isn't the right word. The new groups must have been separated from their parent populations by geographical or climatic barriers, and in isolation they rapidly diverged, physically and culturally."

"That's the standard line. But, come on, John – look at the holes! Why such a dramatic series of emergences occur all around the world, in such a short period of time? And how can such similar linguistic and cultural groups have developed spontaneously *on different continents* – English, for instance, in North America, Africa, Australia?"

I was uneasy to be under attack in an area so far from my own speciality – which was, and is, Morocco's Almora-  
vide Empire of the 11th century. "There are theories of  
linguistic convergence," I said uneasily. "Common gram-  
mars reflect the underlying structure of the human brain.  
It is a matter of neural hard-wiring –"

"But if you actually *observe* them," he said sharply,  
"you'll find that languages *don't* converge. In fact lan-  
guages drift apart – and at a fixed, measurable rate.

"For example: suppose you have a land colonized by a  
group who pronounce the vowel in 'bad' – what the pho-  
neticians call RP Vowel 4 – with the mouth more closed,  
so it sounds like 'bed.' A few decades later, a new bunch  
of colonists arrive, but by now they have reverted to the  
open pronunciation. Well, the older settlers seek a certain  
solidarity against the new arrivals, and they retain their  
closed pronunciation – in fact they close it further. But  
that makes for confusion with RP3, as in 'bed.' So that  
must move over, sounding more like 'bid,' RP2, which in  
turn becomes still more closed, sounding like 'bead,' RP1.  
This is what the linguists call a push-chain –"

I held up my hands. "Enough linguistics!"

He permitted himself a fairly straightforward grin. "All  
right. But my point is, *you can trace such phonetic chains  
in the versions of English spoken in America, Canada* – the  
example I gave you is from Australia. We know that the  
divergence of the English group of languages began in the  
17th and 18th centuries – there was a divergence, you see,  
not a convergence – just as the new populations *emerged*  
in Australia and America. It is as if there had been influxes  
of new settlers, interacting with the existing stock..."

"Influxes from where?"

He eyed me. "John, be honest – I think that if you had  
never before heard your quaint theories of emergence  
and convergence you would dismiss them out of hand.  
*What we are looking at is the result of colonization* – wave  
after wave of it..."

Which was absurd, of course. I suppose I glared at him,  
unsympathetic.

He smiled, but his expression was cold, his gaze directed  
inward. "We make patterns," he said now. "It's in our  
nature. Scatter a handful of coloured pebbles on the  
ground and we make a picture out of them. That's what  
you historians do. Make pretty pictures out of pebbles..."

Now I had no idea what he was talking about. I had  
the awful feeling he was disintegrating, right in front of  
me. "Peter –"

He looked at me. I peered into his church-window eyes.  
"You see – I think it's happened again."

Even at college he was always the last to nurse another  
shot out of a dying bottle.

And it had gone on from there. When he'd been hos-  
pitalized briefly after a 35th birthday party bender –  
complete with drunk-driving car crash – there had been  
some communication among his old college buddies.  
Maybe we all felt a little responsible; some of us (not me)  
gathered around.

Dorehill said he wasn't an alcoholic, clinically anyhow,  
and refused treatment. He gave up drinking, just like

that, and had been sober for seven, eight years.

Sure. Except that my uncle, a recovering alcoholic in  
my own family, would have summed up that behaviour  
in one word. *Denial*.

I had to agree, having seen the pattern before. Dore-  
hill might be dry, but he was still a problem drinker, to  
say the least. As he hadn't been in a programme or  
sought counselling, he was at risk of relapse. And now  
here he was, sipping iced tea, wound up as tight as he  
could be, obsessing about 1962.

A dry drunk. White-knuckle sober.

None of which made him wrong, of course.

"It was the war," he whispered. "Those damn missiles in  
Cuba. And the cockpit of the war would have been  
another ancient land – the mother of the newer colony  
nations, perhaps..."

He talked on, rapidly, fanatically, barely coherently –  
of a great tongue of land sliced away, of landlocked towns  
suddenly becoming ports, of anomalous salt concentra-  
tions in the ocean, of how the world's rocks and oceans  
juddered like a bathtub struck with a hammer, of frag-  
ments of memories transmuted into new folk tales – of  
the adjustment of every human mind on the planet.

Solipsistic nonsense, of course. But as I listened, in the  
mundanity of that bright, bustling café, it suddenly seemed  
to me that I was huddled in a circle of light, a circle that  
reached only a few feet, and beyond there was nothing but  
darkness, unmapped, unexplored, incomprehensible.

But then a waiter moved smoothly through the café  
and opened windows; at once a cool, salty breeze from the  
ocean wafted into the room, breaking up the heavy mug-  
giness of the afternoon air.

Once again I tried to be kind. "Look, Peter – you must see  
how this looks. I mean, where are these aliens of yours?"

His face was set, composed. "You haven't been listening."

"Well, this isn't 4000 BC. For all the limitations of our  
eyes and minds, what of our records? TV, films – a billion  
photographs in family albums... Are you trying to tell me  
that *they* were all changed?" I shook my head, impatient  
with myself. "And then there's your claim that our mod-  
ern nations were born of colonies of this detached place.  
In that case its history, its culture must be utterly inter-  
twined with ours. How could any force, no matter how  
powerful, detach one from the other? And what of Occam's  
razor?" I rapped the tabletop between us. "It is simpler  
to assume that the table is real than that there is a vast  
invisible machine which generates the illusion of the  
table. Just as when I consider my own memories –"

His lips quivered oddly, and that half-suppressed anger  
flared again. "So damn smug." But the anger faded as  
rapidly. "Ah, but you can't help but think that way. We  
are such small creatures. Well, if nothing else, you are  
in at the birth of a new myth structure, John. How priv-  
ileged you are." More emotions chased across his face –  
resentment, baffled curiosity, confusion. "You know, I  
sometimes wonder if it was necessary."

"What?"

"The amputation. Maybe we wouldn't have gone to war  
after all."

I felt awkward, remorseful. "Look, Peter, I'm sorry if –" "We might have muddled through, without Their interference. Maybe that was how it turned out, in some other universe." He abruptly drained his cup. "More tea?"

I'd had enough, of the tea and of Peter Dorehill. I got up to leave.

But his voice pursued me, out into the shining air of the beach front. "You and I were just ten years old," he said. "Ten years old, John, when They stuck Their fingers in our heads. What do you think about that?..."

A year after that last brief meeting, Peter Dorehill disappeared from view, theories and all, sliding off the face of the Earth like his purloined continent, presumed lost in a fog of alcohol. According to my uncle, dry drunks invariably lapse – and when they do, the fall is spectacular and destructive.

Still, the news saddened me.

On the day I heard about it I took a walk through Old Tangier, which is the *medina*, a walled Arab town, a maze of narrow alleys. I climbed to the Bordj el Marsa, the port battery which offers some of the best views of the city and its harbour. From there I followed the Bab el Bahr steps out of the old city to the port gates, and the beach promenade.

Well, how *could* I tell if anything I remembered corresponded to the truth? Occam's razor is only a philosophical principle – a guideline, not a law. Was I an arrogant plains ape, assuming that what I was *capable*

of seeing comprised everything there *was* to see – making up comforting stories from patterns in scattered bits of historical wreckage – clinging to simplistic principles to convince me the stories were true – complacently judging a theory by the theorist who delivered it?

But even if it was true – even if nothing anybody remembered before October 1962 was real – what was there to be done about it? *That* was the essential futility of Peter's solipsism. He may have been right, but we must continue to behave as if it were not so. What else is there to do?

...Of course, I thought, that might be what They want me to think.

I smiled. I stared out over the enormous greyness of the ocean – the huge, misnamed Mediterranean, which stretches unbroken from North Africa to Scandinavia – and then I turned away and walked back into the bright, noisy clutter of Tangier.

Stephen Baxter's previous stories for *Interzone* include "Sun God" (issue 120), "The Fubar Suit" (issue 123), "War Birds" (issue 126), "The Twelfth Album" (issue 130), "The Barrier" (issue 133), "The Plain of Bones" (issue 140), "Marginalia" (issue 143) and "Cadre Siblings" (issue 153). A new interview with him follows.

# PARALLAX VIEW

Keith Brooke & Eric Brown

foreword by Stephen Baxter

illustrations by Dominic Harman

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—from the foreword by Stephen Baxter

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# A Painter of IMMENSITIES

**Stephen  
Baxter**  
*interviewed by  
Nick Gevers*

**P**robably the most visionary of the so-called "Britpack" authors who revitalized British sf from the late 1980s onwards, Stephen Baxter has matured into a dominant figure in hard sf. His novels and stories span the cosmos with a breathtaking cognitive ease, opening up vast panoramas of scientific understanding, understanding that transforms the human species in strange exhilarating ways – or destroys it utterly.

For sheer scope, few future histories can rival that laid out in Baxter's continuing "Xeelee" sequence, made up thus far of (1991), *Timelike Infinity* (1993), *Flux* (1993), *Ring* (1994) and *Vacuum Diagrams* (1997), as well as the chapbook novella *Reality Dust* (2000) and various uncollected stories, such as "On the Orion Line" (2000). Having in the opening instalments of that series emulated the greatest works of Arthur C. Clarke and Larry Niven, to the point of overshadowing them, Baxter next turned to the oeuvre of H.G. Wells in *The Time Ships* (1995), a magisterial sequel to *The Time Machine*; he had already delivered resonant homage to Jules Verne in *Anti-Ice* (1993). Baxter's short stories of this period are collected in *Traces* (1998).

In recent years, Baxter has produced a steady succession of big blockbuster novels, all concerned to some degree with the NASA space programme and possible alternatives to it. *Voyage* (1996) is the story of how the Americans might after all have gone to Mars in the 1980s; *Titan* (1997) is a ferocious summation of all the opportunities (like Mars) which we have missed; *Moonseed* (1998) suggests just how necessary it may be for us to vacate the Earth, sooner than we might think. And the "Manifold" trilogy, consisting of *Time* (1999), *Space* (2000) and the forthcoming *Origin*, provides a rather awesome estimation of the place of humanity in an empty universe – or a very full one.

Other projects by Baxter include the "Mammoth" trilogy – *Silverhair* (1998), *Longtusk* (1999) and *Icebones*, due in 2001 – and a best-selling collaboration with Arthur C. Clarke, *The Light of Other Days* (2000). His latest book is an intriguing non-fiction conspectus of long-term human destinies, *Deep Future* (Orion, January 2001).

I interviewed Stephen Baxter by e-mail in November 2000.

NG: Reading just about any of your major works, one is struck – even overwhelmed – by the vast, the cosmic, range of your imagination and concerns. It's a cliché by now to compare you with Olaf Stapledon and Arthur C. Clarke, but you have certainly inherited their command of scale, and more. What influences and considerations have drawn you so consistently to limn the immensities of space and time?

SB: After being drawn to sf and the future as a kid by the likes of Gerry Anderson, I grew up with Wells and Clarke (I came to Stapledon a bit later). I was always struck by visions of the very far future, of cosmic ruin and human destiny, which is certainly what you get with Clarke. Probably something to do with my Catholic upbringing – which is all about a universal story with a beginning and an end – and growing up in Liverpool, a port that served an Empire that was pretty much gone before I was born. I've never been satisfied with the social clamour that fills the human world; I like thinking about how our here-and-now is just one square on a huge chessboard of possibilities (a Dick image I think).

NG: You're one of the central figures in hard sf, both in Britain and globally. Do you think "hard sf" is a useful and accurate label as it is presently applied? How would you define the ethos of hard sf?

SB: I'm sure it's a useful label – labels are there to help readers find what they like – but whether it's accurate or not, who knows? Hard sf is an amorphous foggy slice of sf, which is itself amorphous, so how can you be accurate about that? If I had to define it I'd

say hard sf is about the allowable; you can wildly extrapolate, but you have to try to show what might be possible, one day, someplace, according to physical law. That was what drew me to read hard sf in the first place, the notion that this was a glimpse of somewhere that might actually exist. But I don't think there's any one ethos. All sf after all has always been a sublimation of our concerns about the present, whenever the present happens to be. And we all have different views about those concerns. You can write hard sf about science and technology without being a one-dimensional fan of it – see my *Voyage* – you can write disaster stories in which Bruce Willis doesn't save the world – see *Moonseed* – and so on. I would say my fiction is often (not always) about the impact of our scientific understanding on us and our view of ourselves; that doesn't always mean we get to win.

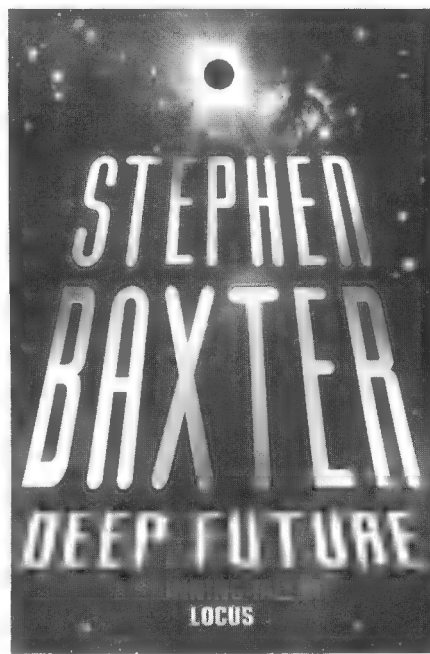
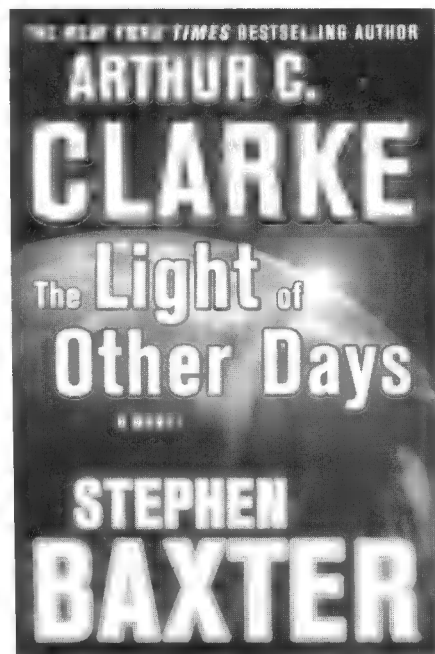
NG: Your publishers like to claim that you tried to become an astronaut about a decade ago. How serious was this attempt? And how important has your direct experience of the sciences been in your development as an sf writer?

SB: I applied for the guest-cosmonaut slot on Mir offered by the Soviets maybe ten years ago, the place eventually taken by Helen Sharman. I got over a lot of hurdles – I had the right background – but fell because I'm not fluent in any foreign language. I've since met a lot of people who got further than me. I was quite serious in the application, and I bet I could have done the job, and given the chance would have gone like a shot (literally). I was drawn to science and engineering through science fiction. I'm actually a chartered engineer; I did engineering

research and have published articles and an academic book. But I found I was restless with "real" research; it was too narrow and specialized for me. So I worked as a teacher, and in industry in different roles. I did more research in the wider world – I took a business degree for instance and have even written a couple of management textbooks. But all the time I was writing sf, and gradually got published, and eventually that took over my life. My science background is a big help, if I want to figure out conditions inside a neutron star for instance (as in *Flux*). But I wouldn't know how NASA works if I hadn't done time in big corporations like NatWest Bank, and I don't think anybody can tell human stories if they haven't had a life.

NG: Your works seem animated by a sort of grim irony, a sense that no matter how enormous the technological prowess of the human species may become, the cold, unsympathetic universe always has the last laugh. Why this jaundiced perspective on ultimate human capabilities?

SB: I get accused of pessimism sometimes because I tend to portray humans, even of the far future, as limited creatures, who never get to transcend their limitations and figure it all out; that's true in my "Xeelee" sequence for instance. I don't see why it's inevitable that we will be smart enough to figure out the universe's ultimate secrets; maybe there's a level of reality we can never crack (just as computer programmes are now proving math theorems beyond the grasp of a human mind), and maybe we will meet (or construct) alien minds fundamentally smarter than ours (as in the "Manifold" books). But really that's



my reading of history and the world around me, and others might disagree. And I think it's actually more interesting in terms of stories to assume we aren't the biggest fish in the pond. On the other hand, since even in the "Xeelee" books humanity survives at least five million years, I could also claim to be an optimist. So it goes.

NG: Speaking of the "Xeelee" sequence: that was your first major undertaking, five volumes long and counting, because you're still adding to it. How did you conceive this sprawling future history? And what new directions is it taking?

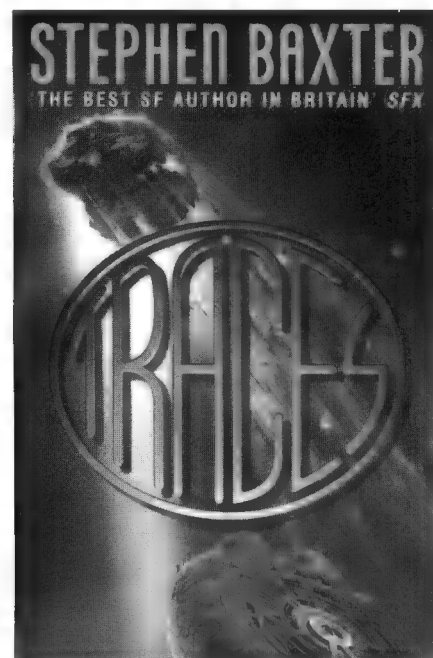
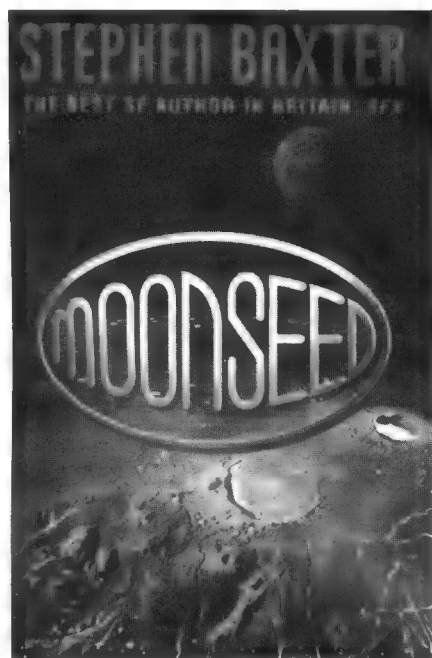
SB: Like a lot of writers' future histories, I think, it grew organically. My first published story, "The Xeelee Flower," was a straightforward predicament story in which I needed powerful off-stage aliens – hence the Xeelee. I worked on a story a little later called "Shell" about humans surviving in a kind of cage after a vast defeat by more powerful off-stage aliens – and it occurred to me that if I made the aliens the same, I had the beginning and the end of a vast epic storyline. I was still learning my way, so having this outline future history as a prop was a big help, in providing frames for the stories and novels that followed – a common vocabulary, technology, political history, even recurring characters. By the time of *Vacuum Diagrams*, which is a fixup of the stories, including "The Xeelee Flower," I had mapped out the shape of the timeline, particularly the beginning and end, and after five books I put it aside for a while. But I was always aware that there was a whole chunk of the

*"Hard sf is  
an amorphous  
foggy slice of sf,  
which is itself  
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be accurate  
about that?"*

history in the middle which I'd always found interesting, but wasn't sure how to handle. I call this "The Third Expansion," in which humanity, tired of being overwhelmed by superior forces, begins to battle its way to a certain supremacy, making many sacrifices in the process – but in the end we become engaged in a 100,000-year war against the Xeelee, a war that ends up shaping our very evolution. (*Raft* and *Flux* are set in this period.) So now I'm working on short fiction to feel my way through this period, and am planning longer works concerned with the turning point of the war.

NG: The "Xeelee" novels and stories feature, alongside their gigantic space-time vistas and astonishing weight of concept, some elements that read like recursive homages to the conventions of the sf of the pulp magazine era – for example, invasions of Earth by aliens called the Qax and the Squeem. When you write extravagant space operas like *Flux* and *Ring*, how much allusive irony do you consciously employ?

SB: Basically I try not to employ irony, allusive or recursive or otherwise, just as I try to keep out of the forefront of my mind all the levels of metaphor that come with any piece of fiction. I try to get fully immersed in the fiction; I'm not interested in writing elaborate jokes. I'm just trying to tell as compelling and honest a story as I can, with the tools I have at my disposal. It's no surprise though that certain themes crop up, such as encounters with powerful and exotic alien life forms, because they are the source of such good stories. But I'm too young to remember (or have been influenced by) the pulps!



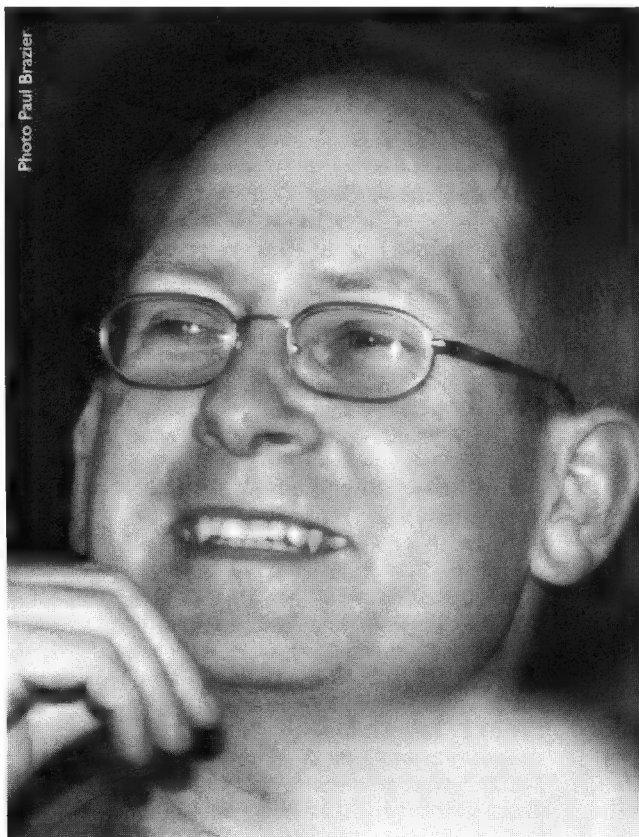


NG: Your other earlier works include two steampunk novels, one of them a very successful long sequel to Wells's *The Time Machine*. What led you to these exercises in literary homage?

SB: I've written a number of alternate-history stories, and the novel *Anti-Ice*. It all depends on the idea. I was led to *Anti-Ice* by speculations about anti-matter comets whizzing through the solar system. It occurred to me that (with a little tweaking) such stuff could have provided a power source for cultures in our past. I mused about the Romans (or maybe Carthaginians) with steam engines and the like. But I came back to the Victorians because they knew the rest of how to build a spaceship, such as recycling the air; they were actually making submarines. And you can't write a novel about superscience Victorians without a nod back to Verne! So I suppose *Anti-Ice* was on one level a homage. But in writing alternate history I'm more interested in the exploration of history than in literary homages. And of course *Anti-Ice* was basically a 1990s novel about 1990s concerns. Victorian Britain, armed with ICBMs and spaceships, is the only superpower, and has to decide whether to intervene in its neighbours' messy disputes – just as the West faces similar dilemmas now. The ending of that book is pretty dark; technology is always a double-edged sword.

*The Time Ships* was different. I had an idea for a large-scale history-changing novel, an escalation of changes, colonies forging deeper into the past, generating new realities, reaching all the way back to the Big Bang. But given such a complicated background I knew I needed a straightforward frame to tell the story. And I hit on the idea of doing a sequel to *The Time Machine*. I'd always remembered that that book, a big favourite of mine, finished on a hook for more stories, as the Time Traveller disappears on his momentous second journey into the future. And I knew that the centenary of the book's publication was coming up. So it seemed an excellent opportunity to put all this together. And once I was working with Wells, so to speak, the project took a different course, as I began digging into the concerns and themes of Wells in 1895. Much of this has resonance for our times, of course. Again I suppose on one level you could call this a homage to Wells – it is after all a sequel – but in places I think I'm

pretty tough on him; I have him (or anyhow his Time Traveller) confront some of the less welcome outcomes of what Wells campaigned for – notably the scientific planning of societies by non-democratic elites. I've done more alternate-history stuff since; it all depends on the idea, the story, and how it has to be told. But to be honest if I research such a story I read more history than period fiction, and that's usually where the idea comes from in the



first place; I have a feeling that fiction deriving only from fiction is a bit thin...

NG: You've been a prolific short-story writer throughout your career. What continues to attract you to shorter forms, which presumably are much less lucrative than your novels?

SB: I think I'm more a natural novelist, but in some ways you can't beat the short form: the clear expression of a single new idea seems well suited to sf. Basically I write short fiction because I have ideas that suit being expressed that way. After a time I (and I suspect all writers) have learned how to "farm" ideas. I know I have certain deep obsessions and concerns, not all of them conscious, and I have interests and themes I've pursued during my career, some of which you've touched on. And as I continue to work, writing, doing research of different kinds, and generally living my life, I collect material and ideas that cluster around those central interests. Many of those notions will go into the

novels, of course, but some don't fit, or demand by their nature being worked out as a short story – which will sometimes feed back into the novels. It's all kind of lateral and organic. When working on *Voyage*, which is about the space programme's past, I mused on the fate of the 12 Apollo Moonwalkers, who are of course ageing. I wondered how it would be to be the last of the Moonwalkers, dying alone and forgotten in some desolate anti-tech future.

That didn't fit *Voyage*, but it worked as a poignant short story called "In the MSOB" which I was very pleased with. But that notion stayed with me and fed back into the next novel, *Titan*. Also, on a utilitarian level, short fiction is a way of working my way into new territory – as I did with the "Manifold" universe, as I'm doing with the new "Xeelee" material. It's much easier to work out these huge ideas by actually writing something down.

NG: Coming now to your blockbuster novels of the last few years: the successes and failures of NASA – the glamour and the frustration of the American space programme – loom large in all of these books. You seem profoundly ambivalent about NASA: *Voyage* evokes the Right Stuff very vividly, but the book implies that, after all the heroism, a manned landing on Mars would have been a prestigious dead end. Where, in your view, did the exploration of space begin to falter, and why?

SB: The best answer is probably in *Voyage* itself. There are lots of historical turning points – decisions made, opportunities lost. And now NASA I'm afraid has become a sclerotic Big Organization, locked into the Space Station project, which will generate lots of jobs but little else. It's really a waste of money, a white elephant in orbit. In fact for that amount of money you might as well orbit white elephants, and study the effects of zero G on albino pachyderms. Space travel ought to be about travel, about going somewhere. But really Apollo itself was always a beautiful but doomed enterprise, once Wernher von Braun lost an essential early-1960s argument about building a much more flexible (but more expensive) programme that could have reached beyond the Moon, all the way to Mars. Perhaps if America had got locked into that, even given the anti-technocratic mood of 1969 when the post-Apollo future was decided, they might have carried on. But by then nobody

wanted to go to Mars anyhow, as it looked a lot more hostile than we used to dream. That's the politics, but there are deeper levels to the story of course. To think that we went all the way to the Moon just to win a political argument – to think that 12 men have actually walked on an alien world, with no prospect of ever getting back there... You couldn't make it up! And it all had a lot of resonance for me personally (and a lot of others of my age). I was 11 when Apollo 11 landed on the Moon, so I went through my adolescence as everything wound down in the 1970s. Being as egocentric as the next person it all tied together for me, and for a long time space travel came to seem to me a childish dream I had to put aside as I faced the harsh 1970s reality of the three-day week, O-levels and the Osmonds. So it all meant a lot to me, even the wind-down in its way.

NG: *Titan* is one of the bleakest sf novels of recent years, and not only because it features the extinction of humanity. Did you construct *Titan* as a catalogue of everything that could go wrong in the coming decades, and, more deeply, as an indictment of all the intellectual blindness humanity is heir to?

SB: I was once shocked at a book launch when that fine writer Ian Watson opined that humanity is a mad species driven by fever dreams and illusions. I'm a little older now and have learned a little more, and have come to conclude he was basically right. So having worked through *Voyage*, and having done all my research on Apollo and the Cold War, in *Titan* I pushed it all into the future, postulating a new and equally mad space programme predicated by a new Cold War, between the US and China,

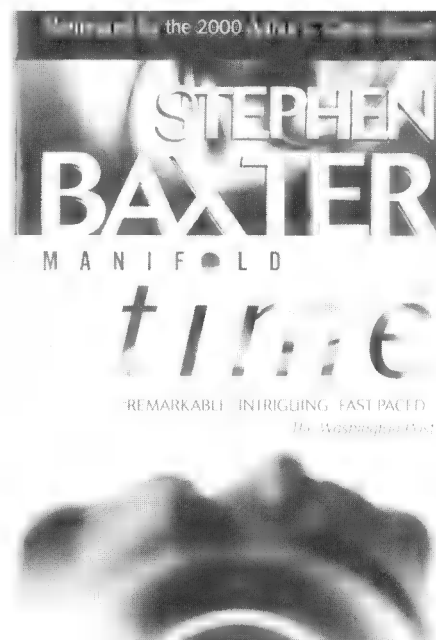
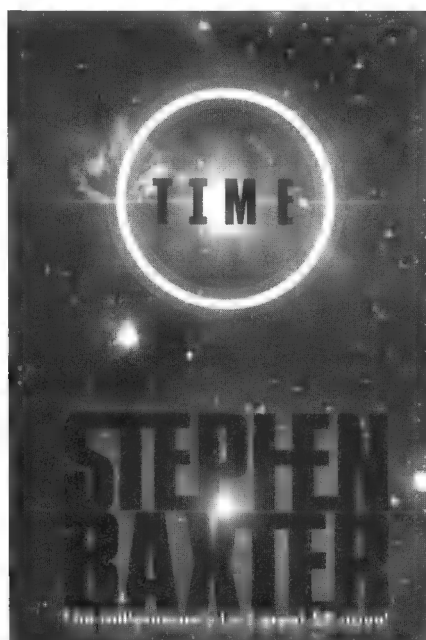
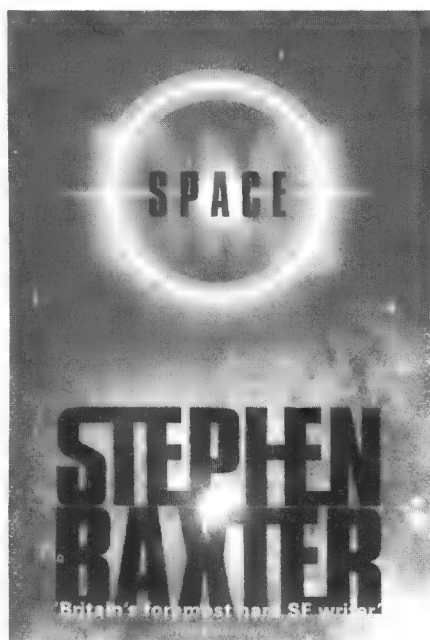
which eventually becomes hot. Just as we might have reached the Moon while blowing ourselves up down here. And for what? *Titan* is dark but it's a pretty angry book, I think; I may have this core belief that we are a flawed and limited species, but that doesn't mean we have to throw ourselves under every oncoming truck.

NG: *Moonseed* is a rather more optimistic book than *Titan*, but only in relative terms: the Earth is still destroyed, by a kind of matter plague from the Moon. Why are you so consistently fascinated with the Moon (rather than, say, Mars)? Why does it so often figure as a source of destructive energies in your works – in *Anti-Ice*, *Moonseed*, "The Ant-Men of Tibet"...?

SB: I suppose that having grown up with Apollo I've always been fascinated by the Moon. I was a (lousy) amateur astronomer and used to gaze at the craters and mountains; and during the Apollo days the Moon opened up as a world really for the first time. Now we have learned that the Moon's presence may have been central in creating humanity, thanks to stabilizing the Earth's spin and creating tides, and that it was budded off the Earth in a giant interplanetary impact, about the most dramatic event you can conceive, and it happened here! I think we take the Moon for granted. It is after all a whole alien world whose features you can see with the naked eye; if Mercury, say, was suddenly towed into orbit around Earth it would be the biggest event in history. So I suppose I'm trying to give the Moon the role it deserves, whether for good or ill; I keep on doing it in the "Manifold" books too.

NG: The "Mammoth" books – one of your two current trilogies – are at least superficially a departure for you: novels told from the perspective of the eponymous animals; yet they are really a further medium for your speculations on time and evolution, aren't they?

SB: Yep. I was set on this idea by recent speculation that mammoths (dwarfed) may have survived on islands, off Siberia and California, protected from climate change and human hunters. I had the notion of telling their story, from their own point of view. But as I learned more about mammoths and their close relatives the elephants, the more I realized what fascinating and different creatures they are, or were – with a whole different sensorium and experience of the world from ours – and their take on the history of the world would be sure to be a lot different. I also changed my views I think about mankind and ecology; a mammoth hunt is very different if you look at it from the mammoths' point of view. I don't know if I'd call myself a Green. And the evidence is still confusing about how much, for example, human hunting contributed to the extinction of the mammoths. But for sure an ecology consisting of a single species is not going to be viable; if we were smart enough we would embrace biodiversity because that's the only way to ensure the stability of the ecosystem that we rely on. And what a tragedy that there are no more mammoths; once they're gone they're gone, and we'll never know what they were really like. I can't bear the thought that our closest relatives the chimps might be driven into extinction in the wild in my lifetime, before we've really figured out what they are really like.



Even if we survive future philosophers might have a tough time figuring out our place in the universe if our closest surviving relative is a blue-green algae.

NG: Your other ongoing trilogy, "Manifold," seems like your most ambitious project thus far, as evidenced by the volumes' sweeping titles: *Time*, *Space*, *Origin*. When complete, will the series stand as a complete fictional summary of the trends inferred by contemporary cosmology?

SB: This series is really about the Fermi Paradox. If the aliens existed, they would be here. This has become one of my obsessions the more I've thought about it, drawing in all the other stuff such as cosmology. It really doesn't make sense that life got started here – apparently spontaneously, and then spread as far as it could, producing us, who have already walked on another world and made enough noise to waken half the Galaxy (literally) – but nowhere else. But that seems to be the truth. The sky remains silent. Earth shows no signs of tampering in the past. The stars show no evidence of modification. And so on. But the universe is old enough for a thousand colonization waves to have washed over us by now. This is really a deep paradox – something is wrong with the way we are looking at ourselves and/or the universe – and I'd predict that by 2100, say, the unravelling of the paradox will have taught us an awful lot; paradoxes are how science advances. "Manifold" is about different possible resolutions of Fermi. In *Time*, we are indeed alone – maybe the strangest notion of all. And we figure out our destiny and responsibility, which is

mainly not to blow ourselves up. In *Space* the aliens suddenly show up. But then the mystery is – why here? Why now? How come we didn't see them before? It turns out the universe is a pretty lethal place, and we have to figure out, with our cousins, how to survive. And in *Origin* there is a more paranoid explanation.

NG: While reading your latest book, the futurological prospectus *Deep Future*, I constantly felt a sense of recognition: here was the hard scientific thinking directly informing so much of your fiction writing. In addition to being a work of persuasive "popular science," is *Deep Future* in a way your notebook made public, a guide to the wellsprings of your creative inspiration?

SB: My heart is always going to be in sf. But I've always found that people I've met at literary events, etc, are just as interested in talking about the science – the future, other worlds, etc. – as the fiction. So over the years I've gathered material, published in various outlets as essays or talks, on what the "real" future might be holding for us, to inform conversations like that. (Of course it all feeds back to my fiction.) I've come to realize that although the outlines of the near future are very uncertain, the farther future – when the stars die and the universe starts to cool down – is on large scales possible to predict, because life, if it survives, will be hemmed in by physical laws. But on the other hand over the past few decades the scientists have speculated on ways we might be able to survive for an indefinitely long time into the future – although it will take a lot of engineering to do it, and our descen-

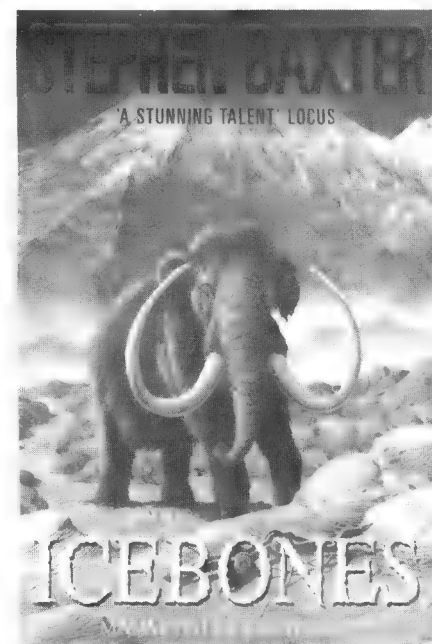
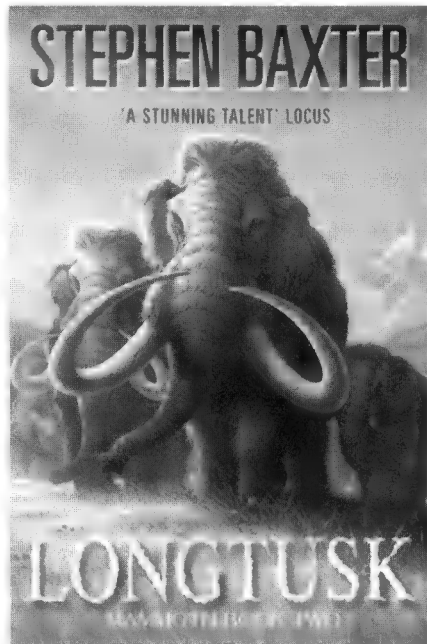
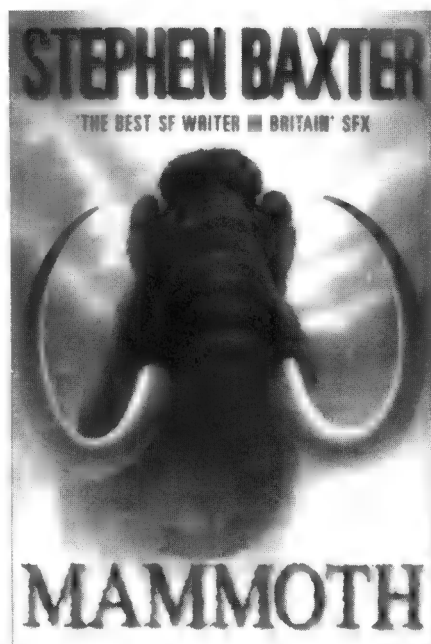
dants won't be much like us. So that's the theme of the book, our modern vision of the future, spanning the near future to the furthest we can see. And it is a kind of offshoot of the thinking and research I've been doing over the last ten years or more, a different expression of the same obsessions.

NG: Still on *Deep Future*: looking at the state of the world now – in late 2000 – do you think there is truly much hope of the clarion call to go back to space being heeded at last? Which way is the balance of human destiny tending?

SB: I think we're at a key moment. We're clearly smart enough to trash the planet; will we be smart enough not to? Right now we have the resources to save ourselves and the world – space resources could help – but that won't last forever. If we get it wrong over the next few decades our descendants, if there are any, might not forgive us. I'm actually quite optimistic. We're a lot more aware of the wider issues, of spaceship Earth, than we used to be. But we're still just as mad as ever, and after all we haven't evolved to think very far ahead.

NG: Finally: what lies ahead, immediately after the "Manifold" and "Mammoth" books? Are further projects taking shape in your mind?

SB: I'm planning some work on human evolution. If I had one wish it would be to meet a Neandertal. How would it be to meet beings as close as that, and yet clearly quite different, in every way they lived their lives? ...In the longer term, more "Xeelee" universe material. 12





## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

What fun it was last November to see arts pundits gritting their teeth and defending a spaceship picture. *Loves of Shepherds 2000*, a huge sf painting by Turner Prize nominee Glenn Brown, became front-page news for its exceedingly close resemblance (in outline and composition) to Tony Roberts's 1974 Pan UK cover for Heinlein's *Double Star*. Laudable "appropriation" of sf imagery, as the Tate Britain curator would have it, or old-fashioned plagiarism? Brown failed to win the £20,000 Turner Prize, unfortunately for Roberts, who had planned to invoice him for a substantial cut. In fact Brown pinches images regularly and openly – the Tate fuelled this fuss by omitting his tiny credit to Roberts – but, outside the art establishment, not everyone agrees that Real Artists needn't bother about copyright or permissions when "appropriating" from lesser breeds.

## TWITCHING AND SHATTERED

**L. Sprague de Camp** (1907-2000) died on 6 November 2000 aged 92, outliving Catherine Crook de Camp – his wife since 1939 – by only seven months. He began publishing sf in 1937, with the 1939 novel *Lest Darkness Fall* now regarded as a classic time-travel story, while the Harold Shea romps that he wrote with Fletcher Pratt from 1940 onwards (collected as *The Compleat Enchanter*) are perhaps the most popular comic fantasies ever to emerge from *Unknown* magazine. De Camp was well loved in sf fandom, wrote much nonfiction and biography as well as fiction in his long career, and received most of our field's major awards including the Hugo,

Nebula, Pilgrim and the SFWA Grand Master accolade.

**David Eddings** chilled our blood in a Del Rey newsletter interview: "The first thing a fantasist needs to do is to invent a world and draw a map. Do the map first." Silly old Tolkien, starting with languages!

**John M. Ford** had his long-awaited kidney transplant in November. The op was successful, and the patient was heard to say: "I am more than before." Neil Gaiman subsequently arranged delivery of a special British meal to the hospital, in the form of steak and kidney pie. "No original parts are removed," marvelled a revitalized Mr Ford: "the new one goes in the front, marsupial-fashion..."

**Stephen King** suspended publication of his "download free, pay on the honour system" serial *The Plant* as of 9 November 2000. His assistant Marsah DeFilippo first said this was because only 46% of readers paid up (success beyond the wildest dreams of anyone else using such a publication plan); in a later statement, though, she insisted that reader response had nothing to do with it. Some think King simply grew tired of a project that in his terms never generated more than small change. Around \$375,000, supposedly.

**Terry Pratchett** had a sobering moment while on his latest tour. "I was signing in Weston-super-Mare when a lady in the queue, after proferring a book, said with a sigh: 'My father was an sf writer. But no one's ever heard of him.' I cautiously ventured: 'Who was he?' She said 'Edmund Cooper.' We have heard the chimes at midnight..."

**Ian Watson**, provided the world failed to end as he toastmastered the Armageddoncon sf convention in Israel on the night of the "real" new millennium, had the awesome responsibility of introducing the Israeli Minister of Communications to launch a set of commemorative stamps with "first day covers depicting aliens investigating a giant monolith inscribed with SCIENCE FICTION IN ISRAEL in Hebrew, English, Arabic, Klingon, and Elvish." The British Council, contradicting Foreign Office advice to keep well clear of Jerusalem during recent upsets, positively urged Ian and other Brits to attend Armageddoncon... either as a salute to its supreme cultural value or because sf authors are expendable. STOP PRESS, December 2000: Armageddoncon now postponed to Autumn 2001 (probably) since, in Ian's words, "most of the foreign guests have chickened out."

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Cyberbullies.** "Fandom Inc," owners of US commercial sf website Fandom.com, seem to believe they therefore own the word "fandom" and have sent threatening cease-and-desist mail to the Fandom.tv site. These threats imply that "Fandom Inc" have successfully trademarked the word, which it seems they have not. *OED* cites for "fandom" go back to 1903; sf fans have of course used it since the 1930s. Annoyed media fans made noises about a boycott of Fandom.com. Others were swift to bag unregistered "fandom" domain names like fandom.co.uk and fandom.org.uk...

**Factoids.** From the cutting edge of H.G. Wells research, the trade magazine *Broadcast* tells us that the new US TV series *The Invisible Man* is "based on the H.G. Wells book about a thief who opts for a pardon through scientific experiment which allows him to turn invisible." Meanwhile the *Independent's* listing of a *Horizon* science documentary warns of "supermassive black holes or unimaginably destructive gravitational fields that apparently exist in every solar system, including our own Milky Way."

**Small Press.** Ben Jeapes at Big Engine is unhappy that Parcellforce is rejecting MSS on his behalf, returning them without comment to the sender. "The reason is that Parcellforce apparently don't deliver to PO box numbers, though they are quite happy to take your money and not actually tell you so." With high-pressure salesmanship, Parcellforce advised afflicted author Tanya Brown: "Use a different carrier."

**Antecedents.** Recent research into the catchphrase of Discworld's Librarian led to a possible literary source. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922, p424 of Penguin MC edition: "Ook." *Terry Pratchett* comments: "Dunno. Never read more than a few pages of Joyce – thought he was a berk."

**Thog's Masterclass.** *Dept of Cruel and Unusual Geography*: "Columbus never set foot on the continent that bore his name." (Gregory Benford, *The Martian Race*, 1999) "[Arthur Conan] Doyle, ever the English gentleman, looked away bashfully." (Jean-Claude Dunyach, "Orchids in the Night," *Interzone* 160) "She [J. K. Rowling] has sold forty million copies in as many countries." (Sue Lawley, Radio 4) *Dept of Biblical Longevity*: "It formed with the rest of the solar system, around five billion years ago. That's fifteen million human generations..." (Kim Stanley Robinson, *Red Mars*, 1992) *Dept of Weights and Measures*: "...reduced to Earthly terms, Professor Jameson learned that a borg measured 7.193 feet and some few inches" (Neil R. Jones, *Twin Worlds*, 1967)

# Surfers

Ruaridh Pringle

Scott's day had been pretty weird, even before the nightmare with the chicken.

Through the morning, he had been plagued by a vague but persistent feeling that all was not quite as it should be. It was small things, like the librarian from Manchester who had spoken to him in Mandarin: explicable in itself, but the real head-cruncher had been that he had replied in the same language.

Then there had been the never-ending fag. He had lit it before squeezing into his car in Musselburgh, and he was damned if it had lost even a millimetre as he stepped through the door of his agent's house in Polwarth, clean across town 40 minutes later, by which time he was feeling quite ill. He had staggered apologetically to the bathroom swearing to give up smoking then and there, and flushed the nightmare object feverishly down the U-bend.

No, the turning point, when all vestiges of normality had fled Scott's day had been the repeating sandwich.

Black Tam had (in spells of clarity between squalls of what could have been either reminiscence or flashback) explained with great patience the complexities of marketing music in an admittedly hip yet ultimately specialist genre, and the intricate and subtle ways in which these conspired to dictate that, no, Scott would see no royalties this week either, nor, probably, the next – and by the way was it just possible the “new” (snigger) CD would undergo final mastering this decade? Scott had emerged from the soupy resinous fog inside his agent's semi-detached bungalow feeling distinctly below par, for more than one reason.

Uttering a crescendo of heartfelt sighs he had sat morosely in his car mostly failing to read the morning paper, although occasional items percolated into his disturbed thoughts. Several distant galaxies were “missing” – which seemingly had a lot of boffins in a whirl – and some Hollywood star was suing an underwear label for the eye-watering consequences of a seam entangling his Prince Albert.

He felt his stomach twitch as he turned the ignition. Selecting the first of his Mk1 Fiesta's usable gears and lurching into Slateford road, he felt the unmistakable spasms of reverse peristalsis. Yet without the trauma associated with his usual alcohol-induced conversations with God.

As he calmly brought something up into his hand, he did not even deviate from his steady course towards the Gillespie Crossroads. Until he saw what it was.

A corner of a cheese and pickle sandwich.

He stared. The contractions continued. Soon he was staring at two-thirds of a cheese and pickle sandwich.

Passing seconds later, a casual observer would have noticed a pair of parallel black marks connecting an ageing Ford Fiesta of indeterminate colour with the road it had just left. If passing sufficiently slowly, they may also have noticed a perturbed man on all fours by its open driver's door, transfixed by what could have been a neat stack of crusty white-loaf sandwiches.

The house seemed much as Scott had left it that morning. There was a rent demand on the doormat, and a

musty smell which said the roof would need fixing soon.

He was pleased to see that The Shit was nowhere to be seen, although the accursed creature had left a disembowelled mouse in the kitchen and rips in the curtains. Cat would be home in half an hour. Again, he had the panicky feeling something was not quite right.

Scott took a shower, and emerged feeling better. It had sometimes seemed that the streams of droplets were elongate homunculi of Betty Boothroyd, but this was not problematic with his eyes shut.

The doorbell chimed. Scott hastily wrapped a towel about his modesty and sidled dripping into the kitchen, but instead of going to the door went to the fridge, inexplicably in the mood for an omelette. Opening the fridge door, he removed the cold chicken to get at the eggs, placing it on the floor.

He took up the eggs, and turned, coming eyeball to eyeball with a live, but plucked, chicken which was breaking out of its vacuum wrapping.

"Eeeuuurggh!" exclaimed Scott, as with horrible and inexplicable inevitability his hands began opening the bulk egg-box. With a startled cluck the chicken swivelled on its claws, like a square-bashing private.

"No!" howled Scott, who somehow knew exactly what was coming, yet also that he was powerless to prevent it.

Ms Cathrionaidh Gordon's day had been more trying than most. One of her little darlings had manufactured an operational ground-to-air missile launcher using a Fairy Liquid bottle, toilet-roll cores, flour, salt and sugar, iron filings, fuzzy felt, paint, copper wire, and glue.

He had launched a Jerry-built projectile through the (closed) skylight of 6C, obliterating some kind of giant featherless bird which had been passing overhead (half the school had seen it), deluging the school with char-grilled steaks which the pre-pubescent hordes had pounced upon, and eaten.

The result: 20 vomiting seven-to-eleven-year-olds. The infirmary had been unimpressed.

Braking her Subaru in a spray of clattering gravel, she noticed a conspicuous new dent in Scott's decrepit Fiesta. He had again failed to put the rubbish out at the gate. The increasingly unstable noxious pyramid by the back door would be growing for another week.

She flung aside the kitchen door. Her intended remonstrance perished with a gargling noise in her throat.

Her long-term boyfriend was kneeling by the open fridge, wet hair wildly askew, clad in only a towel behind a loudly squawking, featherless chicken, which seemed to be proffering its hindquarters.

The kitchen was dim, fridge-light dramatically illuminating the tableau. Scott was moaning what could have been a mantra. He reached into the eggbox at his knees, and, as she looked on, grabbed the chicken by the legs, placed an egg against its posterior, and pushed. The chicken made a frenzy of clucking, and the egg disappeared.

"Scott?" spluttered Cat when she could find her voice. "What are you doing?"

Scott faced her, expression somewhere between mor-

tification, anguish and despair.

"Help me!"

"What? Help you stuff a live chicken with boiled eggs!"

Scott paled. "Boiled...?" He delved in the box.

"Stop it! Stop it!"

"I can't."

"That bird's not even female!"

All vestiges of colour drained from Scott's sweating face. Closing his eyes, he seized the chicken by the legs again, and applied another egg. Another squawk, but this time more fatalistic in tone.

"Stop! Scott, how many eggs has it got up there?"

Scott appeared deeply traumatized by the question. "Eight!" he wailed. The egg disappeared. "Make it stop!"

Cat – an imposing woman a good two inches taller than Scott's skinny six foot one – kicked the egg box away, and tackled him to the ground. As if a spell had been broken, the chicken scrambled, clucking hysterically, for the still-open door.

Standing semi-silhouetted against the garden, it turned and rumbled, indignantly and clearly, in the voice of Barry White, "You sordid... Oh my God!"

Then it ran away.

Cat pinned Scott's arms painfully to the vinyl. "Cat," he gibbered, with much head-thrashing. "Cat! First... the librarian, and the cigarette... a loaf of sandwiches – and now *the chicken!*"

"I caught you assaulting poultry in a manner barely covered by the word 'depravity.' It is in your interest to start making sense."

He crumpled. "I've lost the plot, Cat."

She gave him a strangely confused look, then rose and sat on the Inca rug draped over the futon in the corner. The Shit darted into the room and sat smugly on Cat's lap. Scott glared. The creature raised a contemptuous eyebrow.

Momentarily, the perverse irony of the nomenclature of the two personalities dominating his life was deliciously appealing to Scott. But then, Cat called The Shit "Noodles" – and if she ever suspected the depth of their animosity, it wouldn't be The Shit who got the bum's rush.

"I've been straight for 15 years, but today's been like revisiting '73."

She appraised him with just a hint of warmth. She might almost have believed him.

"I've thought I was going..." A brittle look entered his eyes. "I *am* going mad. See, if I wasn't, I... would not... be... seeing... a large shark – with *sheep's teeth* – outside the kitchen door."

The shark, whose body was strangely flattened and eel-like, swam calmly through the door, deftly plucking the spiked, spitting Shit from Cat's lap with its impressive array of herbivorous molars, and left the way it came. A shoal of baboon-faced fish who wore their eyeballs outside their spectacles popped in briefly to cheekily poke their tongues, and left radiating smugness.

Cat screamed, making Scott scream as well. "Noodles!" She cried. "*Schnookums!*"

To Scott's horror, she had begun to look vaguely chicken-like.



The walls were very, very green, and the sky outside unnaturally blue. Small cumuli rubbed themselves vigorously against lamp-posts and telegraph poles, emitting sensuous growls. Now that he looked closely, the sky seemed corrugated. *Shiny*. Like a new radiator.

It was no longer any colour he could describe.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen it had begun drizzling an assortment of tasteful snakeskin handbags and kaleidoscopic canvas attaché cases. Outside, the air remained clear, although it shimmered like oil. Cat's eyes had a dangerously glazed look about them as she watched the bags burst on the rug – whose deep fronds uncoiled in the jasmine breeze – spilling their contents. Some bore eclectic masonry, some huge rubber screws and brass hinges, some tightly wrapped bundles of musical scores, whose notes scattered and fluttered away in the wind. Some disgorged tiny chattering actuaries, who scuttled busily here and there leaving smears of revenue, occasionally tripping on their distended hairy ears.

Others contained dark plagues of polka-dotted deck-chairs, or toads of different colours and costumes. One of these, a small specimen with too much rouge and a tacky mock-diamond tiara, hopped on the cedar coffee table and, with an operatic gagging noise, allowed Cat to pull (after a lengthy struggle) The Shit, bedraggled and spitting, by the tail from its gullet onto the kitchen floor.

Except that the cat's grin was a self-operating typewriter. With regular pinging, a page slowly reeled out of the top of the creature's head.

Scott seized it. It read: "THIS IS A PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT. Please do not alarm yourself at what you are experiencing. Normal service shall be resumed shortly. Meanwhile, do not attempt to close your eyes. This will not help, and may be counter-productive."

As Scott read each word, it spoke in a professorial Bavarian accent, accompanied by a six-piece brass band and xylophone.

Blinking, Scott passed the message to Cat. With apparent concentration and a deft flick, she distended it into a spaghetti-like tube which she passed through one ear and out the other, making words appear sequentially where her eyes should have been.

Speech had, by now, assumed appendix-like redundancy.

The walls were transparent. Herds of broadleaves swept majestically south to the fissured, bulging sea. Grinning faces pulsated distantly, yet claustrophobically, on the horizon. Vast swarms of birds, boats, and pressed underwear as favoured by 19th-century American settlers formed a writhing torus which span horribly around Scott's now immensely elongate head.

Scott was past alarm and well into an abyss of stoic horror. Cat was unrecognizable. Yet he instinctively knew that what he was observing was her. He ached to touch her, comfort her; yet could do neither. Any urge to reach out produced only a quivering hollow on his grotesquely distorted body surface, or shot rope-like appendages into space, visible only as wiggling filaments against the sucking stars.

A nauseating sense of acceleration overcame him, and of suffocating intimacy with the jostling people and crea-

tures he could *feel* all around. Especially Cat. He could smell her as they grew skywards, although she seemed at the same time impossibly distant.

Soon they were just two of uncountable shoot-like tendrils growing away from the surface of the tiny glowing ball which was their world, waving like fields of barley against the pulsing mauve heavens.

Then he could feel it. The pressure.

An unbearable pressure. Something was approaching. Fast. Things were changing, and would change unimaginably more. He felt it in what had been his bones, and knew that those around him knew it too.

He focused on Cat, attempting to give (and receive) reassurance, but the noise from the immensely tall vertical slit which had replaced his mouth, nose and eyes was only a ghastly ululating screech. Somehow, he knew Cat understood.

He was turning in on himself: inside out, yet with each convolution he finished as before, only to begin the cycle again. He no longer possessed any reference to anything he perceived, and trying to understand only made him panic more.

The inversions increased in intensity and frequency until eventually his straining, creaking mind went "eek!" and did the cerebral equivalent of face-planting in the mud.

Scott awoke to clattering dishes. He was on the futon in the kitchen alcove. Cat was over the sink, putting the last plates of yesterday's breakfast on the rack. She looked tired.

A half-empty box of Camels was on the floor. He reached for it. Halfway there, his hand froze, and withdrew.

"Morning," trilled Cat, a little too breezily, turning at the sounds of movement. The cat was in the centre of the rug. It was staring fixedly at the wall. "Did you sleep well?"

Somehow it sounded more of a question than usual. He shut his eyes. "Aye," he murmured. "Fine." There was an awkward pause. "My turn for breakfast then."

"Aha."

He prepared to cook the usual blackened eggs on toast. "What would you like?"

Her eyes bulged. "Muesli."

"Grand." He shook the water off two bowls from the rack, and filled them from a cork-lidded jar on the shelf. Now for the milk.

He opened the fridge door with great hesitancy.

On the second shelf down was the chicken.

But there were no eggs.

His hands shook so much as he handed the bowl to Cat, he almost spilled the contents. They sat on the futon, in silence but for the crunching of muesli.

Eventually Cat said, "well, the little monsters await," and left with a nervous peck on his cheek.

Scott collapsed onto the futon, and breathed very deeply. He fetched his favourite acoustic guitar from the studio, strummed it experimentally, but his rhythm and heart were elsewhere.

He pored over the Yellow Pages. He rang three psy-

chiatrists, but as of this morning all had three-to-six-month waiting lists.

Doctor Archie Umbach was having a difficult day.

"It started," his patient told him, "when I called on my next-door neighbour. He's a musician, you know – quite well known. Anyway, the kitchen door was open, and when I walked in a plucked chicken leaped from the fridge and stuffed me with boiled eggs. I know they were boiled. I have them here in this bag."

Behind the couch, the doctor wrung his hands and whimpered, hoping his patient wouldn't notice.

Scott had been to the shop to buy eggs, and sat on the futon determinedly eating an omelette. He had even got as far as lighting a fag, but it had made him ill.

Cat would be pleased.

He hadn't imagined it, he told himself. He *hadn't*. Or if he had, it was apparently part of some group hallucination.

People, he decided, were peculiar. Faced with something not easily understood, rather than try, they pretended it had never happened. Well, he was different. An individualist. He would put his mind at rest.

And the logical first step was buying a local paper.

He was just getting up when the doorbell rang. He hesitantly opened the door. It was raining. Standing outside with an umbrella was a very unusual goat.

"Mr Scott Fraser?" it said; accent fruity with the Morningside area of Edinburgh. "I sent you a message yesterday. May I come in?"

"Away with you," said Scott. "You're a goat."

"I really do think you should listen to what I have to say. It affects everyone."

Scott regarded the elocutionally affected goat with intense suspicion over the rim of one of Cat's fruit teas. He would have much preferred caffeinated "rocket fuel" as Cat called it, but both coffee and cigarette stocks dried up with suspect regularity.

The goat regarded him impassively, sipping its tea. There was something deeply strange about this goat. Although quite definitely a goat, it appeared identical from every angle. Odder still, if he looked slightly past it, the creature disappeared, yet when looked at directly, it completely filled his field of vision.

"You are a very strange goat," he observed.

"That is because I am a Möebius Goat," said the goat.

"I see," said Scott, although he did not.

"I have neither inside nor outside, from your reference. I constitute one continuous surface – or plane would be a more accurate description. Essentially, I exist in four dimensions – though not necessarily the four you expect."

"I see," repeated Scott, who still didn't. "But however multidimensional, you are still a talking goat."

The goat did not contradict him.

"Would you care to explain this? And why do you want to talk to me?"

"Well," began the goat, daintily sipping from its coffee-stained Gary Larson mug, "neither question is easy to

answer. But I will try. I am a Möebius Goat because that is how your perception makes sense of what I am."

Scott scratched five days of greying stubble. "And what are you?"

"Something it is very difficult for you to perceive."

"How conveniently circular."

"The second question is more important. I am here to save your planet."

"That's some relief. If you'd dropped by to borrow some milk, *that* would have bothered me."

"I'm serious!" bleated the goat, plummily. "Please listen carefully: there is little time. An event of unprecedented destructive power occurred a long way from here billions of years ago, which, as we speak, is changing the universe utterly."

"The wave-front of what is, effectively, an expanding bubble of space in which the physical laws we understand do not apply, is racing towards your planet, and will soon engulf it. We believe it was spawned by a white hole ejecting matter from somewhere very exotic – but whatever, the wave front is approaching at fractionally under the speed of light, and when it passes it will destroy everything you know. Utterly."

"What you felt yesterday was the first minor advance ripple. What you experienced was your mind making the best sense it could of experiences for which it had no reference. Imagine that multiplied by a million, and you have some idea of what's in store."

"The ripples are relatively harmless. The Wave itself will alter binding forces between particles, and change completely the way gravity and time behave – if these concepts have any meaningful analogue. It is impossible for us to ascertain exact effects, but nothing as we know it will survive."

"Not even atoms."

"I see," said Scott, nodding sagely to give the impression that he really did, even if he believed he was conversing politely with a prophetic four-dimensional goat. "So we'll all die?"

"Not necessarily," said the goat. "That's why I'm here. There is a chance you can join us."

"How? And who are you, exactly?"

"In answer to your first question – we would like you to come surfing with us."

Scott's expression remained cautiously blank.

"As to your second question, we are surfers."

"Help ma boab," breathed Scott through clenched teeth. "Make it stop."

"Surf's pumping brother." The goat made an unfamiliar sign with an unexpectedly dextrous hoof. "Hang loose."

"I'm not talking to you. Go away."

"My apologies – I perhaps fail to appreciate the true vibe of the parlance." The goat cleared its throat apologetically. "You see, the wave exerts a form of pressure which, in suitable circumstances, it is possible to surf – in the same way one would a breaker on a beach. There are billions of civilizations living on – *surfing* – the edge of the wave. And more every day. It's a very different existence from what you're used to, but much better than none at all."

"We hope one day to exist on the other side of the wave, which seems to be creation's way of recycling itself. Imagine a universe expanding forever into cold, flat infinity. Would that not be boring?"

"Ehm, quite. And when is all this wave due to arrive?"

"Tomorrow. At 9.15 pm."

Scott's unruly eyebrows arched. "Leaving it kinda late, aren't you?"

"I came as soon as I could: you must remember that The Wave is travelling at almost the speed of light, making it very difficult to outpace. I myself left The Wave 12,000 years ago by your frame of reference – at great personal risk, I might add. But then, actually catching the wave is considered the ultimate thrill." Again the mysterious hoof-sign. "Sick, man."

"I see. So why come to me? Why not a world leader, or some spiritual guru, or leading scientist? I'm a struggling folk musician!"

"What you do will be of paramount importance in the days to come."

"It will?" Scott could not help looking startled. "I get a new label deal then?"

"You, and others like you, can save the world."

"So... no label."

"Eh... not yet. But, an open-air concert has been organized in Princes Street Gardens tomorrow. You must play there, and you must give it laldy. You must arrive at precisely seven pm, and you must follow instructions I give you, although they will not feel like instructions at the time."

"All is set in place. All you have to do is turn up and play. But it is essential that you turn up. This is the most important performance of your life. It is your dream gig."

"Oh yes – and you have also been selected because your past makes you better adapted than most humans to this kind of weird shit."

Cat almost jumped as Scott opened the door to greet her that evening. Dinner was on the table (entirely vegetarian, she noted), and he hugged her warmly as she came in.

So far, all this was unheard of.

He decorked a ten-quid bottle of Australian Pinot Noir, and left it to stand. It was a mellow May evening, and long-tailed tits played decorously in the silver birches outside the tall kitchen window, dappled by evening sunshine.

"Cat," Scott began, finding himself gazing at her in a way he could barely recall. The manner in which a henna-red lock hung across one emerald eye was making him quite light-headed. "Hen. Let's go to the Highlands. Tonight. Take tomorrow off."

Cat's face was a boxing match between a frown and astonishment. Astonishment won. "What has come over you so suddenly?"

"Petal, don't question it: just let's go. Call it my whim. Please?"

She studied his sincere, almost anxious expression. "Where will we stay?"

"Camp."

"Camp?"

"We've the ridge-tent and the mattress. It'll be like the old days."

Cat left a message on the school answerphone.

They drove north through the deepening evening, Cat's head resting on Scott's shoulder for much of the way. Sometimes they kissed, and Scott had to swerve to avoid approaching lorries. He felt almost precisely 16.

They pitched the tent on the soft, sheep-grazed lochside. The aged canvas was holed, but it didn't look about to rain, and even though spring came earlier each year now, it was too early for midges.

"You've smoked not once today, that I've seen," remarked Cat. They lay side by side, staring up at branch-framed stars.

There was an edgy pause. "Gone off the idea."

"Never did like you smoking."

He grunted. "You just liked the illegal stuff."

"Never liked mixing it with baccy."

Again he grunted. A star he was watching disappeared in a little flash of light. Then another, and another. He sighed.

"Cat..." He rolled gently on top of her and kissed her tenderly. She reciprocated eagerly.

"My... I've not been snogged like that since the Isle of Wight festival!"

"I remember."

She felt his undulation at the memory. "So? Do it again!"

He did.

"Cat," he said after some time. "I've something for you. Something to ask."

She was surprised, eager; glinting eyes cat-like under a crescent moon. Propped on one elbow, he took a box from his pocket.

"Pity. Hoped it was something from that shop on Sauchiehall Street."

He looked hurt, then understood and grinned. He opened the box. Inside was a cylindrical wad of silver inlaid with rainbow opals. It had been the most hideous piece of jewellery he had ever seen. He knew Cat would love it.

Cat squinted. "What is it?"

He fetched a torch from the car.

"Fuck!" observed Cat, romantically. "You can't mean..."

"Absolutely."

"But you said... Never... I..."

It had been worthwhile, Scott reflected, for the novelty of seeing Cat lost for words.

"Can and will, hen. If you'll have me. A four-dimensional goat visited me this morning, saying the world may end tomorrow. Shite like that gives you perspective."

"Then about bloody time, you brain-fried degenerate – whatever else you were just hawering about."

"You'll be my wife?"

"Course, you old bampot! What d'you think I've been waiting for?"

He looked sheepish. "Do we, eh, need to register it?"

She stiffened. "I suppose 'Mrs' will do, you kiniving



wretch.”

“My petal.” He knelt over her – a little gingerly – and they kissed again. They made love beneath the stars, and she adored the way his sagging belly brushed hers, and the rough wrinkles around his eyes under her fingertips, and he loved the generous fleshy folds on her midriff which were so good to hold and play with, and her hoarse, breathy giggles which still, after 30 (often rocky) years, made his head spin.

Above them, one by one, the stars were going out.

Their return to Edinburgh next afternoon was through a world which seemed to have clocked off. Even the birds seemed to be home watching TV. Between Loch Earn and the Newbridge roundabout Scott counted five cars, and it was Thursday. Lorry and bus traffic had ceased.

They visited home briefly for Cat to “get floozied” (this entailed donning garments even more lurid and clashing, and applying lipstick far too red and eyeshadow far too green), and for Scott to assemble his gig kit.

This did not take long, consisting as it did of a battered Magnum semi-acoustic which had somehow become his during two missing weeks in Nimbin, Australia; a threadbare kitbag, a shiny capo – latest of a line of replacements blamed on “quantum capo tunnelling” – and a matchbox of equally restless plectrums.

Scott and Cat stepped outside. The local rag on the doormat was still damp from dew.

Its front page was, enigmatically, blank.

As were all the others.

Bag in one hand, medicinal six-pack in the other, Scott sighed. He slowly studied every aspect of the scruffy garden, and the lane with its ivied walls, bent signs, and elegant little castles of dog-turds. Wisps of alto-stratus feathered a chilly blue sky.

“Front’s coming,” he said.

Cat looked at him.

“No pun intended.” He took a very deep breath. “Well, here goes.”

The tail-backs began well beyond the Newbridge roundabout, and it was soon clear they would never make Princes Street Gardens in time, if at all. Half an hour into the queue, the traffic shed any pretence of movement. Scott pulled the steering wheel in frustration, overwhelmed by a compulsion to be in the town centre which was well beyond normal urgency.

Then he saw that other vehicles were disgorging their occupants. Before his befuddled eyes they formed a ribbon of humanity floating through the air as though on invisible travelers.

Innumerable such floating ribbons gradually formed, and these were of birds, foxes and badgers, rabbits, hedgehogs, cats... and bleating sheep and other livestock. All seemed to be converging in the direction of the distant city centre and Edinburgh Castle.

Scott and Cat blinked at the sight, then at each other, then turned to the windows again. A giant rubbery green hand reached out of the sky, and popped them, screaming in terror and still inside the car, into the demonically

grinning maw of a clown’s head.

“Hello,” said the Möebius Goat.

“Gnaaaaah!” said Scott and Cat, in unison.

The clown made rapid progress to the city centre, taking giant leaps from each of its three athletic legs. Though definitely in some kind of space in its head, it seemed to Scott that he, Cat, and the Goat were simultaneously outside, looking on.

“Cat – this is the goat I told you about.”

Cat nodded and blinked, taking the politely proffered hoof.

“There is little time,” fretted the goat. “My calculations were in error – for which my apologies. I severely overestimated the efficiency of your transport system. It seems to have been disabled in some way by the first wave.”

Scott pulled a face. “Seemed normal to me. ’Til sheep started flying about.”

“Alternate arrangements had to be made,” explained the goat, as the clown frolicked over two closely spaced flying ribbons: one of tightly packed cattle, the other of assorted clergy.

“I gather seating will be segregated,” observed Scott. The clown was now capering campily from chimney pot to chimney pot of the suburban terraces, without even unsettling the mortar.

“We shall arrive in a little over two minutes. Shooglenifty are opening, followed by Simple Minds. Please have your repertoire ready, as you are on immediately afterwards, and may be required to perform with them.”

Scott nodded, feeling rather dazed. *Shooglenifty are my warm-up!*

Princes Street Gardens had changed somewhat. Spaced at regular intervals above it were 30 2-D replicas of itself, crammed already with people and animals, segregated into species (“to avoid crowd trouble”). Scott could observe little behavioral difference between groups, except for the molluscs and platyhelminthes, which moved too slowly for behaviour to be visible at all.

The sheep were clapping their hooves. The bovines seemed unimpressed. Some partitions were filled with water. Streamlined shapes moved restlessly inside.

From the stonework of the castle had grown an immense baroque stage, dwarfed by arrays of sky-scrapping amplifiers. On the stage, Shooglenifty were letting rip with “The Tammienorrie.”

“How long until things... er, do whatever...”

“The critical point is in two hours and five minutes,” explained the goat.

With a giant leap, the clown arrived with neatly flexed knees atop the castle ramparts. Its occupants slid comfortably down inside its baggy trousers, then took a small escalator which emerged from beneath the welt of its floppy green boots.

“Timing is crucial,” bleated the goat, above the din of “The Tammienorrie”’s endless crescendo. “It is critical you do not fight what happens. You must do exactly what you are told.”

“How will I know?”

"You will know. Cathrionaidh, you play the bòdhran do you not?"

She frowned. "You can't be suggesting..."

"Accompany your husband."

Cat was aghast. "But I'm not... I only..."

"Swallow this." The goat produced a small, luminous pill which changed hue continuously.

She scrutinized it dubiously. "What is it?"

"Lessons."

"But..."

"Competence can be engineered. Poetry cannot. You have a poetic soul." Shooglenifty had finished the set, and there was a deafening tidal wave of whoops, cat-calls, applause, bleating and mooing, and thunderous slapping noises.

Cat took the pill with intense scepticism.

"I must go," indicated the goat in international sign language, and disappeared.

Scott clutched his head. Cat did likewise, and swallowed her pill.

"Wow," she said. Her common-law husband looked quizzical. "Apparently I am your backing band. We'll need a fiddle, keyboard – preferably a top-end Korg – a set of bongos, Scottish small pipes or Border pipes, an electric fiddle, a tenor saxophone, and Octave D, C, and B-flat whistles..."

Three mules appeared with the required items in large wicker baskets strapped on either flank. One deferentially cleared its throat. "Anything else, madam?"

"We could do with a bass section." Shooglenifty had started a version of "Alasdair's Reel" which made Cat and Scott's hips gyrate helplessly. Even the mules seemed to be shuffling a vague two-step.

"An accompanist has been arranged. He is taking lessons."

Scott grunted. "An amateur."

"He is well known to you." With this enigmatic comment, the mules trotted towards the stage to start rigging the equipment.

Simple Minds were lounging backstage when Scott and Cat arrived. They nodded politely, and the couple took their place in line, standing tensely against the stone wall. Shooglenifty finished their final set, and strode off to deafening applause. Simple Minds were greeted with an equally enthusiastic barrage of noise, and launched stealthily into "Belfast Child."

"Where's this accompanist?" fretted Scott. "We need some practice together."

"I am sure things will work out."

"Good evening," pronounced a snooty Etonian voice. "I, it would appear, am your accompanist."

Eyes bulging, Scott turned to face Noodles the cat. The cat glared contemptuously. Scott rolled his eyes.

"Aw shite. And what is your instrument of choice?"

"Double bass," said the cat.

"What? I'm no a... fucking swing combo! I'm a satirical folk artist! A poet!" he trailed off into incomprehensibility.

"You are a philistine," sniffed the cat. "An uncultured boor."

"You slimy feline shite..."

"As opposed to what? A bovine one?"

"Boys!" cried Cat. "We're on in half an hour! There isn't time for this!" The cat stuck its nose aloft, pressing itself smugly against Cat's legs.

"But... it's a cat, Cat!"

"Well?"

Scott ground eyes with a thumb and forefinger. "How can I put this... isn't the mandolin more of a cat's instrument?"

"Mandolin?" spluttered the cat. "All that tinny plinking? You barbarous, beer-swilling..."

"I was thinking more of practical considerations, you preening ponce! Jeez, everything they say of cats is true."

The cat arched its back and hissed.

"Shut it!" cried Cat. "Both of you. The planet is depending on us."

Scott put his face in his hands.

The three of them, Scott, Cat and Noodles the cat (alias The Shit), walked on a dazzling stage into deafening silence in the wake of Simple Minds, and gazed into the expectant eyes of billions of vertebrates and invertebrates.

"Oh fuck," observed Scott.

Cat and The Shit agreed with vigorous nods.

Suddenly, Scott was gripped by an overpowering urge to play "The Loch Tay Boat Song." He plugged in his jack while Cat footled with her amp settings. The sound man backstage gave the nod, and Scott strummed out an experimental chord.

He almost dropped his guitar. The sound was incredible. A resonance of breathtaking clarity hung and slowly died in the air before the assembled, expectant ranks of creatures.

A low murmur swept through the crowd. An uncontrollable grin slowly cleaved Scott's face.

"Hello Edinburgh," He cried. "Home!" And launched into an unexpectedly Swing version of "The Loch Tay Boat Song."

He didn't even dare look at The Shit. Whatever it was doing, he was forced to concede that it sounded very fine, as did Cat on jazz guitar, then keyboard, then clarsach, and Lowland pipes.

*...And I look up-on Ben Lawers  
Where the after-glory glow-ows  
And I think on two bright eyes  
And the mel-ting mouth bel-ow. Yeah!*

Soon he was strutting helplessly about the stage, the crowd going wild. He found himself inserting snatches of obscure jigs and reels played solely on harmonics. He had never dreamed of playing like this!

*Nighean-ruadh, your lovely hair  
Has more gla-mour I decla-are, oh!  
Than all the tresses rare 'tween  
Killin and Aberfel-DY... LET'S HEAR YA!*

"The Loch Tay Boat Song" transmuted seamlessly into Credence Clearwater's "Bad Moon Rising," then an

impromptu hip-hop version of "Flower of Scotland." It was the acid funk rendition of "My Bonnie Moorhen," though, which really blew his mind – and those of the audience, by the sound of it.

Next came an instrumental: "Hector the Hero," winding up through "The Clumsy Lover" and "The Cook in the Kitchen," finishing on a blistering "Falaldy," which energized the whole audience into a chaos of motion. Even the molluscs were jiggling. Scott's whole body seemed to sing.

Blinking sweat, he gazed at Cat. She was radiant.

"Let's hear it for the big lass!" he screamed at the mike, gesturing with a be-plectrumed hand. The crowd unleashed an ecstatic tidal wave of noise, and Cat responded with scorching cascades of arpeggios.

Scott gritted his teeth. "And, on bass... our funktastic feline, The Sh... *Noodles!*"

The meowing from sections of the crowd actually made Scott put his hands over his ears. The cat was responding with a riff so funky it physically hurt. Scott felt his hands go once more to the guitar, and the result was another set which somehow led to a thrash-metal "Bonnie Lass o' Fyvie."

Half-way through, he found the sound unexpectedly percussive. Turning his head-banging towards the stage, behind a giant drum-set, he found the Goat.

He closed his eyes.

*The time is approaching,* said a voice in his head. *More power is needed: you will be joined on stage.*

*By whom?*

Shooglenifty wandered on, donning bazoukis, guitars and bongos, deftly adjusting beards and spectacles, plugging amp leads in sockets, and themselves into the music. Then Simple Minds were joining in. Scott usually found amalgamations of this kind beneath his dignity, but this sound cut into the soul like a diamond claymore. The grunge guitars faded, and out of them rose a single soaring note: Cat's whistle holding the audience spellbound.

Slowly, piece by trembling piece, the musicians assembled "The Flower of Kristiansands," which transformed into "Wild Mountain Thyme" with equal and beautiful subtlety.

*Will ye go lassie go...*

*And we'll all go together!* replied the crowd, forming slow waves. More artists were drizzling steadily onto the stage: Dick Gaughan, Phil Cunningham, Ivan Drever, Martyn Bennett, Tony McManus, Sileas, Ronnie Browne, Runrig, The Old Blind Dogs, The Shamen, a visiting Welsh Male Voice Choir, and several prize-winning pipe bands, until a tidal wave of musical noise reached skywards like searching fingers.

Then Scott noticed. It was dark. It was not quite nine pm, well after the equinox, and the sun was clearly visible. Yet it was dark. There were no clouds. And no stars.

And the heads of all those on stage resembled buttocks. Apart from that of the cat, which unpleasantly resembled the hindquarters of a plucked chicken.

And the audience...

*Keep playing!* urged a voice. Even so there was a musical hiccup, while those on stage looked in alarm at each others' buttocks – or whatever was their own hellish per-

sonal interpretation. Nonetheless, they quickly regrouped, for a spirited rendition of "Loch Lomond"; Simple Minds' Jim Kerr spreading his cheeks for sterling vocals which had the audience screaming, bleating, croaking and mooing.

Even with what was to follow, the image of one of his favourite vocalists singing with his arse would haunt Scott for the rest of his life.

The crowd were transmitting a warm blue glow. As Scott watched, it intensified, and began to halo the heads (or buttocks) of those on stage. Time seemed to be losing conviction: Scott's movements had begun to feel languorous and curiously smooth, as if expertly directed by overhead strings, although the music remained as energetic as ever. It began raining: hamburgers, in poppyseed buns, with little harlequin cow-tails and snouts, and floppy red clown shoes. He observed with detached curiosity as these apparitions scurried in growing numbers about his feet, reciting Wordsworth and Maoist haikus. He was sweating buckets.

Literally.

And now he was sure: his body was distending.

"Not again," he whispered through clamped teeth.

*Stick with it.* The furiously drumming Goat twirled its sticks deftly and nodded reassurance. This was not comfortable to watch in the circumstances. *Not long now. Things might become difficult for a while soon.*

Become? You *have* to be taking the pish!

He tried to ignore the disconcerting way his tentacles flapped the surf-board he was now holding. *Just play!* Purple lights. Green lights. Lights of no recognizable colour.

Flapping bat-like things, with enormous goofy teeth and fruit-basket hats. Oprah Winfrey everywhere, as a pervasive pale mist. The audience a kind of stew, rotating slowly at the outside, and faster in the middle. Nausea. Increasing... *Oh God!* Helplessly he retched up a huge transparent cigar containing a model railway of infinite size with carriages of cheeses and assorted fruits, although they were also yodelling human babies skewered on an endless string of barbed wire, nose to tail.

*Don't lose it! Concentrate! Play faster!*

Through it all cut the music: a beam of pure light through the darkness and confusion. Somehow, despite having lost all frames of reference, he managed to play and sing – and better than ever before. He closed his eyes, but closing them only opened them and vice-versa, until he was lost. Shuttered doors span obliquely into and out of focus, severing him into independently gyrating sections across confusingly indefinite planes amidst overpowering wafts of peppered onions and creosote.

Still he played.

The music seemed now like a physical force, and the knowledge that he was part of it, a cog in the wheel of this huge engine of sound, gave him the resolution he needed.

Inspiration came like a jolt. Suddenly he knew what it was all about, and with that came a dizzying perspective shift.

He was again a tendril, standing tall above a horde of similar tendrils waving like long grass over the surface of the translucent sphere of a planet he knew as Earth. He couldn't see The Wave, but could *feel* it. It made him



sing like a tuning fork; his music sensitizing him to the vibrations of its approach. He felt acceleration. The sphere which was below, yet also on either side and above, was trailing an intense blue streak.

Then he perceived The Wave.

It had no form he could describe, yet seemed more solid and smooth than the smoothest solid. Forms representing the sun and several planets melted into it one by one, like butter into hot sugar. Ahead of it was something like a cloud. He saw this was composed of uncountable objects, hurtling towards them. Some he knew were rocky worlds similar to his. Others smaller objects he couldn't define. Some were spider's-web structures of impossible size, far greater than the largest planets that surfed the unimaginable, terrifying front of annihilation. There was an intense sensation of pulling. Ripping...

Then things started to get weird.

Scott opened what he had learned to recognize as a fridge, and removed what, with a lot of practice, he had come to recognize as a beer. The immensely long tendril beside him fluctuated in a way which, barely a month ago, he would not have understood.

"Fancy a drive up to Glencoe this weekend, darling?"

Behind them (and in front, and above, and inside), The Wave shimmered eerily, dominating everything with its unnerving presence. Long ago, it had spread from a single point. Now its circumference was such that its surface may as well have been flat, and what curvature was evident was largely down to the time light had taken to travel from the parts further away. Across that vast, radiating expanse, which faded imperceptibly towards neoredness at its mysterious extremities, bright blue stars dissolved like a constant drizzle of hot sparks.

Vertigo was not a term which adequately described life next to the Wave. Recent polls showed that in the weeks since planet Earth had taken up surfing, few humans had ventured outside their dwelling-analogues.

Scott experimentally swigged his beer, discovered he had mistakenly poured it into a plant pot whilst dialling a chiroprapist in Belize, then with great effort made the connection with what these days passed for a mouth. At the same time, he destroyed the television, made universal divers' signals indicating suffocation, and rubbed soil, jam and broken glass into the carpet and a coffee table guide to herbs. But it was progress. The rest would come with practice.

"Sure, petal," he squirmed back. "Though truth be told, the Outdoors doesn't light the candle the way it did since, you know... becoming a tendril."

Cat gave off a non-committal kind of odour. "Tendril analogue."

"We could call round on those waxy wee vaporous beings afterwards, over on that complex-nest thing orbiting us. With the unpronounceable name."

"That does not narrow it down much."

"The ones that reek of sweet 'n' sour."

"Ah, them. Aha."

"I've got friendly with a group of them – all keen musicians – although I barely understand their lingo yet. Or

ours, come to that."

"I'll never get used to being able to just stretch myself through space like some... demented hair-band." Cat rippled expressively with girlish enthusiasm. "Gives me the skitters with that *thing* so close."

Scott shrugged, accidentally making himself a small sphere. For a moment, Cat wondered where he'd gone. "So much to make sense of. Know what? It's fun!" He laughed – which made him an analogy of purple, emanating the smell of cabbages. "Fact, I've no felt so stimulated in years. Think I'll pen some new songs. I'll confess I never thought what I did would have such a practical application. I mean... I knew music could be powerful, but not literally."

Cat joined him in happy cabbagey purpleness. "Who'd have thought it: music, the universal constant."

He smiled warmly with his rubbery, luminous anterior nodules, enveloping her in what once had been arms. "Aw now, I think a few of us suspected."

**Ruaridh Pringle** (no relation to the editor of this magazine) is a new writer who lives in Edinburgh, Scotland, and the above is his first published sf story. He has written journalism on sports and travel topics, and tells us he has published occasional short semi-fictional mountaineering stories. He has also written an sf novel which is currently seeking a publisher.

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Nick Lowe

# MUTANT POPCORN

It's taken a while for Hollywood to recolonize Mars post-Viking, but the fact that it looks so like Arizona (or here Northern Australia and Jordan) under a \$30 filter has worked hard in the red planet's favour, and the absence of visible Martians hasn't deterred moviemakers from finding places where they're hiding, whether in the form of a living civilization or just as plot devices buried in the soil, ready to be activated by unwary explorers. Nevertheless, in the history of Martian cinema, *Red Planet* marks a small giant leap, as the first Hollywood product to recognize the shift of theme in print sf from alien contact to terraforming – from ancient civilizations that have been there all along and are just really good at hiding, to new-frontier fantasies of replicating the achievements of ecological imperialism on the interplanetary scale. This is, as readers know only too well, a challenging theme even for hard-science visionaries with half a million words to play in, requiring not only a firmly integrated grasp of current work in the earth, life, and space sciences, but an ambitious imaginative reach in the application of all this detailed technical knowledge to the task of engineering a plausible resolution of space exploration's greatest challenge, and all in terms that an intelligent lay audience can engage with. With *Red Planet*, therefore, it's not so much a question of how Hollywood will meet this awesome challenge as just how risibly it will fail.

Viewed in these terms, *Red Planet* is something of a triumph, lithely limbo-dancing its way beneath expectations that start low ("By 2025, we knew we were in trouble, and started to look for a new home") and move several notches down as the film gets going. The tease continues for an act or two, during which it remains piquantly unclear even which kind of Mars movie the ending is going to deliver. All we know is that a mystery agent has preposterously oxygenated the atmosphere (and apparently raised the surface temperature and atmospheric pressure) to within human-tolerant limits, within the space of a few years and *without anybody noticing*. But will it turn out to be a superior Martian intelligence à la *Mission to Mars*; an ancient auto-terraforming device out of *Total Recall*; a dormant bioform inadvertently awakened as in *Species II*, or, just possibly, something battier than all of the above, a solution so ludicrous that even the most jaded veteran couldn't possibly see it coming? Are the gigantic nudge-nudge homages to 2001 a clue, a massive red herring, or (most cunningly of all) *completely without point*? And which lucky cast member will make it through meteor storm,

crash landing, ice storm (yes, on Mars), anoxia, rogue animatronic Hal-on-legs assassin "in military mode", and nameless stalking menace, to deliver the great techno-flimflam monologue that will purport to explain the underlying science? Surely God-bothering Terence Stamp, "the conscience of the mission", isn't really going to be abandoned with a knackered spleen immediately on Marsfall and never mentioned again? Those who can make it to the final reel with their capacity for innocent surprise intact are in for a treat and a half.

In fact, *Red Planet* is an exhilarating tutorial in how to make a complete bish of the space-mission movie, normally the most robust and forgiving of all sf genres. Admittedly it's a bit of a cheat to start by casting Val Kilmer, who is quite capable all on his own of totalling any movie vehicle before the first day's shot is in the can, and in that respect at least is on absolute peak form here. But since *Red Planet* has nothing even approaching a likeable or well-written character, they really needn't have taken the trouble - though it's a nice touch to dump Carrie-Anne Moss in an orbiting command module with nothing to do but relay plot bulletins in her underwear.

("Houston, I am now commencing ignition sequence and removing my outer garment." Now there's a girl who knows how to play a \$30k-a-minute line with a seven-minute delay.) A particularly bold innovation is the serial use of explanatory flashbacks to dialogue and entire scenes excised from the final edit. Perhaps most daringly of all, *Red Planet* defies genre convention by banishing any kind of moment of transcendence, replacing it instead with little-book koans about Faith and coy hints that what appears to the secular humanist eye to be merely jaw-flooringly dumb plotting is actually evidence of the hidden hand of God, Gaia, or some other as yet undetected midi-chlolean force for good. Those with high capacity for faith may welcome the elimination of cheap awe as a sign of new maturity in the genre, a kind of secular terraforming of the Martian movie. The rest will have to be content with lines like "Reroute the power through the beta processor!", "I'm a geneticist. I write code: A, G, P, T" (sic), and "Some kind of nematode" (sorry, you'll just have to watch, but make sure you don't have any popcorn in your mouth at the time).

Something similar is at work in *The Grinch*, Hollywood's most ambitious attempt yet to steal Christmas for its own and replace all that embarrassing spiritual stuff with its own narcissistic creed of personal growth and healing. In this it's only partly

served by Seuss's fable, which is indeed an important reference text for the ideology of the modern American Christmas as simultaneously secular and anti-materialistic, a celebration of community without either Christianity or Coca-Cola, in which excess consumption is sanctioned by the spirit of collective festivity rather than vice-versa. Unfortunately, Seuss is less compliant with the new mythology that Hollywood wants to switch for the Nativity; so gather round and pay heed to a true Christmas story for our times, the tale of How Hollywood Stole *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.

Outside the US, the *Grinch* book is a pretty minor work in the Dr's oeuvre, Seuss for grinchy no-joys who hate Seuss. It's the one Seuss title to make any significant concessions to sentimentality and character development; one of comparatively few to be driven by a story rather than by language, landscape, and imagery; and

certainly the only one to acknowledge the existence of Hollywood's own peak release season and prime dump zone for mawkish invitations to the whole family to consume obscenely in the name of togetherness. It's an awkward book for Seuss purists, for whom Seuss and Christmas inhabit different vibrational spaces, and the mild anti-commercial message is rather thin gruel compared with later, angrier work like *The Lorax*. As Seuss-with-a-plot, it's not in the same galaxy as *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*, probably the single most perfect artifact of formal plotting in the western literary canon. And it's especially uncomfortable that, unlike the far richer and more iconic Cat, the Grinch does finally surrender to the world and the values of middle-class middle-century middle America against which his dissident campaign of high-octane anarchy was directed, and in the resonant final tableau *carves the roast beast* in

Facing page: Carrie-Anne Moss plays Kate Bowman in *Red Planet*

Below: Jim Carrey is *The Grinch*





those curiously unsettling italics.

Nevertheless, anyone bent on making a sell-out travesty of any Seuss book, however mediocre, has to get past the formidable Audrey Geisel, the Valerie Eliot of early reading: fiercely protective of her late husband's work and reputation, and none too keen to negotiate away its integrity. Craftily and crucially, what Ron Howard's team sold her on was not a script but a performance, a rehearsal of the character and of the star overactor that would animate it; and the stultifyingly bad screenplay presumably came only after permission had already been committed. That's not to say that, viewed simply as a \$20 million performance, Jim Carrey's contribution isn't every bit as professional as it is charm-free. Its obliteration of the actor's visible phiz may indeed be a minor milestone in modern fantasy acting, if not particularly a milestone you'd want to loiter by - though it should be borne in mind that Roddy MacDowall did four films in a gorilla suit and still had some change left out of his dignity. But certainly Carrey is the one player who seems at all comfortable in his Seussian makeup, despite an enforced Connery accent ("I musht shtop thish whole thing!") from the dental enhancements; and some of the more elastic extremes of his facial and bodily mugging look actually more natural here than they tend to on the body he was born in.

The problems, rather, stem entirely from the script, which seems to have been deliberately farmed out to people hand-picked for their complete incomprehension of why anyone would ever enjoy this stuff in the first place. When Seuss writes (and Hopkins repeats) "Now please don't ask why [the Grinch hated Christmas]. No one quite knows the reason," this is taken with the *exact opposite intent*, as an invitation to the writers and their investigative moppet to come up with a backstory trauma that explains the Grinch's hostility to Santa in the only terms that Hollywood can understand: personal rejection at a critical childhood moment of emotional exposure, rather than (heaven forbid) any disillusion with the theft of Christmas by light-fingered capitalists in red-and-white costumes run up by a soft drinks corporation. The oeuvre and imagery of Tim Burton, especially *Edward Scissorhands*, has been exhaustively turned over for plot ideas that will make the Grinch's estrangement more acceptable to contemporary Hollywood taste; while the Grinch's dialogue and, if that's the word, humour is a meaningless, joyless farrago of gag-writers' banter that seems to have been determined entirely by what might sound good delivered by J. Carrey with a green

hairy finger pointing in the air. "Brilliant!" he says to pooch Max after AHA monitoring refuses to allow him to be fitted with a Rudolph schnozz: "You reject your own nose beause it represents the spirit of commercialism! Cut, print, clear the gate and move on!" The audience reaction to such ribticklers is the zenlike sound of lines tumbling into a bottomless well.

The more, in fact, it tries to pastiche authentic Seuss, the more apparent the filmmakers' complete tone-deafness to everything that defines the real thing. The sporadic chunks of original Seussian narration only throw into starker relief the writers' astonishing inability to replicate it in their own supplementary verse. Anyone with the slightest ear for Seuss knows that, for all its artful appearance of dashed-off effortlessness, real Seuss scans. He may admit the odd anapaest into iambs or break into short runs of a different metre, but for the most part his metre is tight (in *Grinch*, anapaestic tetrameters) and his syllables adhere meticulously to their natural spoken value. In contrast, *The Grinch* opens with the couplet "Inside a snowflake like the one on your sleeve/There happened a story you must see to believe." For anyone raised on the real thing, this kind of monstrosity is nails down a blackboard. Even the greatest living Welshman can't bring himself to stress "inside" and "snowflake" on the ultimate, and that extra syllable "must" trips a left-footed jig on the grave of a man who cared more about rightness of language and rhythm than anyone who came within six hundred miles of this script.

The original storyline is pushed to the margins, behind a vast and dismal middle section that exists only to tame the Seussian plot elements by extended attrition; and in promoting the bit-part Who daughter to a pivotal character role, *The Grinch* creates a second, still more problematic centre for its bogus ideological wargames. In the book, the Grinch's theft of the trappings of Christmas has no effect whatever on Whoville, whose Whos spontaneously celebrate regardless as if nothing were amiss. But the film is unable to endorse Seuss's faith in community, and instead sets up Cindy-Lou as a second dissident figure, a small voice of conscience voicing her own scandalous Grinchlike thoughts in the midst of material decadence and overconsumption. ("I myself," she confesses to our hero, "have been having some Yuletide doubts.") At the climax, when we finally return to the originalplot after a seemingly interminable detour, the Whos are reduced by the thefts to precisely the collective gloom and catatonia the Grinch wants but doesn't achieve in the book - only

for Cindy-Lou herself to stand up and persuade her fellow citizens that "it's not about gifts, or competitions, or fancy lights." Thus the Grinch's explosion of insight ("Maybe Chrishtmash," he thought, 'doeshn't come from a shtore") is one shared, not triggered, by the Whos themselves; and his redemption comes from a wholly Hollywood, unwholesomely unSeussian combination of past wrongs righted and present hurts healed by a golden-haired tyke's appeal to the goodness within. And you can bet your price of admission that any film purporting to celebrate a child's right to resist her own exploitation is going to be flogging her nag-merchandise on the way out. After all, it only happened in a snowflake world like the one on your sleeve, and if you now examine your sleeve you'll see any snowflakes turned to slush and vanished while you were distracted by the pretty lights on screen. Don't think of it as burglary, but as a celebratory gift exchange between little you and some far-off corporate interests who owe their inordinate wealth to your generosity. Now doesn't that make you feel a little bit toashty inside?

Nick Lowe

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# The Eaters

*Alexander Glass*

Brandon, as usual, was the last to arrive, hurrying through the rain from his cab to the door of the restaurant. He stood for a moment in the doorway, wet and dishevelled. Between his hands, a shabby umbrella shook, showering pearls of rain in all directions, like a sodden blackbird ruffling its feathers. Somehow, he felt wetter than he should have after so short a dash beneath the storm-filled Seattle sky.

The others must have been here for some time, Brandon realized, as he surrendered his coat and crossed into the candlelit lobby. They had just finished a round of drinks, and were in the process of ordering another. Apart from Brandon's colleagues and the waiter, the only other person in the lobby was an old gentleman in orange robes and sandals, sitting perfectly still in a corner, presumably waiting for his table. He looked as if he had already waited a lifetime; he looked as if he could wait for eternity. As Brandon passed that corner of the room, he saw that the old man's gaze was as white as ice: he was obviously blind. His empty eyes seemed to glow in the candlelight.

Someone was missing from Brandon's party. No one would mention him, of course. Each would do his best to forget the man's name. Competition in the sales division was savage and brutal: it was kill or be killed, eat or be

eaten, as Seward always said; and the ones who got eaten were best forgotten. Of the five men who had made it, only Seward, the head of the department, looked entirely comfortable. He was the only one of them who had been to the Table of the Gods before, and was in the midst of explaining its unusual etiquette, loudly, to his subordinates.

"Ah, Brandon. Good. Good. Better late than never. I thought we might have to start without you. Luckily our table is still being prepared. Have a drink. Warm yourself up. Try the rice wine."

Brandon nodded to the waiter, who smiled faintly, and superciliously, in acknowledgement of his order.

"Sorry I'm late, sir. I couldn't find the place. I was expecting a sign, or... or something."

Seward pursed his lips, and his white moustache bristled, like a small animal scenting danger. "Oh, no, we wouldn't want that. The Table of the Gods has rather a select clientele. It shouldn't have to cater to people who just wander in off the street. Can you imagine what would happen if people came here without knowing what to expect?" He snorted with laughter, and the others dutifully did the same. "Especially if they were women!" More laughter. "Or drinkers from the bar on the corner, in search of some late night chop-suey."

Warner, the department's most accomplished groveller, said smugly: "I thought this was a Japanese place?"

"So it is, so it is." Seward nodded vigorously, showing his approval of the question, whilst everyone else cast Warner looks as dark as the storm outside. "The tradition is Japanese, of course, though unfortunately it seems to be less in demand than before. The owner is a committed Buddhist, or so I'm told, a follower of what they call the eightfold path. They say he has doubts about whether it should continue the tradition. Be that as it may, though it's a Japanese establishment, the cuisine is international. I think you'll find it excellent: the food, as well as the, ah, the table."

When the waiter reappeared to tell them their table was ready, Brandon had only finished half his rice wine. He downed the remainder in a single swallow, and regretted it at once. It took him a moment to recover, so that once again he found himself bringing up the rear. Out of habit, he glanced over his shoulder, half-expecting to see another man behind him; but there was no one.

The room in which they were to eat was also lit by candles, their pale bodies huddled upon iron stands in each corner. The windows overlooked the street, but to Brandon's surprise the heavy green curtains had been left open. Carried on a cold wind, the rain beat against the glass, and chattered on the road below.

The table had six places, and five of them were already taken. Seward sat at one end, which became the head of the table by virtue of his presence. It was also the seat nearest the head of the woman who lay upon the table, naked but for the items of food laid out upon her skin. Had Seward chosen to sit at her feet, they would have lain at the table's head, and her head at the table's foot. If Seward had chosen to sit to one side, the rules of geometry would have had to be rewritten.

Warner had snatched the place by the woman's right arm. Brandon hurriedly took the one remaining place, beating away the treacherous thought that a seventh place should have been laid. The woman lay with one foot crossed over the other; from where Brandon was sitting, his boss's head seemed to be balanced upon her left big toe.

The meats were laid out along the woman's left side: slices of braised beef upon her shoulder, each slice overlapping with the next, like armour. Then Parma ham, over her breast, laid in a circle with the nipple, almost the same colour, at its centre; and then grilled ribs, laid in a row over her own. In the crook of her elbow sat a mound of diced chicken with basil. On the right side was the seafood: monkfish, king prawns, octopus, oysters. A mound of salad sat between her breasts, trailing up toward her throat. A pool of sauce rested in her navel. *Hors d'oeuvres* adorned her pubic hair. The woman's eyes were closed, and a slice of cucumber rested upon each one, as if she were undergoing some kind of beauty treatment.

Brandon found that he could only reach the potatoes, which were laid out along the woman's legs, and the fresh bread rolls, which surrounded her feet. He could not bring himself to ask his colleagues to pass him anything

else, not even an *hors d'oeuvre* – especially not an *hors d'oeuvre* – so he ate only potatoes and bread, both of which were excellent, as Seward had predicted.

The others appeared to be just as embarrassed as he was, though they had had more to drink. They were not dining: the situation was not comfortable enough for dining. They were simply eating. Even Warner had paid his boss fewer ludicrously unsubtle compliments than usual. Only Seward seemed at home, discussing productivity ratios and the upcoming trade fair, just as if they were in an ordinary restaurant. Gradually, the others began to feel more at ease, or at least pretended that they were. Brandon alone, it seemed, remained discomfited. He was happily married, after all, and felt a sharp stab of guilt for having come here at all, even though Seward had made it clear that there was really no choice in the matter. Then, briefly, he felt good about himself for having felt a stab of guilt; and finally he felt guilty again for having briefly felt good about himself for having felt a stab of guilt.

Slowly, the woman was uncovered, slice by slice, prawn by prawn, radish by radish, in a culinary striptease to a soundtrack of nervously munching men. The eaters began to understand Seward's explanations of the meal's peculiar etiquette. The cold ham was eaten only after all the other meats were finished. The *hors d'oeuvres* were left until last. The two slices of cucumber remained uneaten. The table herself was never mentioned aloud.

Brandon felt sour inside. At first he assumed it was because his stomach was over-full of potatoes and bread. Then he realized that all his colleagues, except perhaps Seward, felt the same. Maybe it was the lightly perfumed smoke from the candles; maybe it was something about the cooking itself. Whatever it was, Brandon could feel it worsening, slowly but steadily.

At last the meal was over, and Seward pushed his chair back with a sigh.

"That completes our main course, gentlemen," he said, teasing a pubic hair from between his teeth and regarding it with a detached air. "But let me assure you that the best is yet to come. I've ordered a selection of desserts. I'm sure everyone will find something to their liking."

Warner asked: "Are they going to clear the table?"

Seward's moustache bristled once more, and this time his brows beetled in accompaniment. Warner had committed a serious *faux pas* by referring to the table directly. The others looked away, dabbing with napkins at their lips, hiding smiles of satisfaction.

After a time, Seward replied: "We'll return to the lobby, for drinks. Another room will be prepared for the dessert course."

As they filed out, Brandon took a last glance back at the table. The woman had not moved, not once: not when Seward had sliced the beef upon her skin, not when Freeman from accounts had fumbled and dropped his prawn, not even when Brandon himself had accidentally prodded her in the thigh with his fork. She had lain as still as death, as still as the old blind man out in the lobby. Brandon had not even noticed her breathing. He wondered for a moment whether she might actually be dead.



With a shudder, he turned away, and hurried to catch up with the others.

To his surprise, the old man was still there in the lobby, sitting in his corner, the candlelight playing in his empty eyes. Surely, Brandon thought, it could not take that long to get a table. Then he realized the old man must be between courses, just as his own party was; although if so, the man had carefully returned to exactly the same spot, and resumed exactly the same position as before.

Just as Brandon was thinking this, the old man moved. He turned his head, slowly, so that the smooth white orbs of his eyes appeared to be staring directly at Brandon. He raised an orange-clad arm, and beckoned with a weathered finger. Brandon could almost hear it creaking as it bent, and straightened, and bent again. He glanced around at his colleagues, but they were busy laughing at one of Seward's hoary commercial anecdotes. Walker was deliberately, and rather obviously, laughing louder than the rest. No one would notice if Brandon slipped away for a moment.

The old man smiled as he approached. "Are you enjoying your meal?"

"Well," Brandon said, not wanting to lie, but not wanting to admit that he had only eaten potatoes and bread, "I enjoyed the potatoes a lot. And the bread was very good."

"Ah, a bread and potatoes man?" The old man nodded thoughtfully, and his smile grew wider.

Not sure how to reply to this, Brandon said: "Are you between courses as well?"

"Ah, no. I am coming to the end of this course. Afterwards, I hope to follow a higher one. But we shall have to see what comes about."

"I don't think you quite understood my question."

"The real question," the old man said gently, "is whether you understood it yourself."

He rose to his feet, and walked away across the lobby, past Brandon's colleagues, who did not seem to notice him. Though he walked slowly, he did not need to feel his way, as most blind people would. He did not carry a cane. In the doorway he stopped, and turned, and beckoned to Brandon once again, with the same weathered finger. This time Brandon did not even glance at his colleagues, but followed the old man at once, back to the room where the first course had been eaten.

His stomach had settled: he did not feel as queasy, now, as he had at the table. He was afraid that returning to the room might bring the unpleasant sensation back; but in fact, as the old man pushed open the door, the queasiness vanished altogether.

"Look," the old man whispered, as if in awe. "They are preparing her for a second course."

Brandon leaned forward to look. A waiter was clearing away the glasses and the cutlery. Another was dusting the six chairs, and moving them one by one back into position. Two more were delicately cleaning the woman's skin, sponging away all traces of the food that had lain there, then patting the skin dry with soft white towels. One of them gently lifted away the two slices of cucumber from the woman's eyes. She smiled, but her eyes

remained closed.

As the waiters moved silently away, the woman moved on to her front, turning her head to one side and folding her arms beneath it. Once again, one foot crossed over the other. For a moment she lay there, at rest, while the rain beat upon the window. Then the waiters returned, soundless as before, and began arraying her body with desserts. The centrepiece was a *crème caramel*, placed on the small of her back; then there was fruit, and cakes, and coulis, and ice-cream, and a small mound of thick white cream.

Whilst the waiters added more and yet still more sweets to the table, Brandon turned to the old man and said: "You're the owner. Aren't you?"

The old man bowed his head. "My name is Po."

Brandon considered this a moment before deciding it must mean his guess had been right. "Why are you showing me this?"

"Because you ate so little, and that only bread and potatoes – even though you did not realize what you were eating."

The sour sensation rose again for a moment in Brandon's stomach, and then subsided. "What were we eating?"

Po turned, so that his sightless eyes stared straight at Brandon's own. "Sin, Mr Brandon. Sin. Have you ever heard of sin-eaters? Of course you have. People who ate a meal from a dead man's body, and so carried away his sins with them. An interesting idea."

"We ate that woman's sin? But she wasn't dead. Was she?"

"The technique works just the same, whether the subject is alive or dead. It required six of you to take on her sins. Not in equal amounts, I might add. You ate the least. Mr Seward ate the most, without even noticing any discomfort. He is already carrying so much, a few more sins will make no difference to him. Mr Warner also did well. He will make a good sin-eater, in time."

Brandon shook his head deliberately. "I don't believe this," he muttered, although the words sounded unconvincing, even to him.

"Of course you do. You can feel the sin, sitting in your stomach. As we speak, it is being absorbed into your being. Think of it as beginning to enter your soul's digestive tract."

"But you're a Buddhist. Aren't you? Do you even believe in sin?"

The old man smiled again. "A good question. To follow the eightfold path, one must maintain right thoughts and perform right actions; but if one does not, is that sin? I for one would say not. But it hardly matters whether or not I believe in sin. The woman on the table believes; and if she is to follow the eightfold path, as she wishes, she must put her sins aside."

"What about me? How can I put my sins aside – my sins, and the ones I've just taken on?"

"There is a simple method. Someone can eat them from you."

Brandon imagined himself lying on a table, naked, his eyes closed, his body laden with food, while a party of businesswomen ate from him – never mentioning aloud,

of course, what kind of table they were using.

The waiters had gone. The room stood empty once more, but for the waiting woman on the table. Then, on the other side of the room, a door swung open without a sound, and a group of men walked in. This was not a business party, Brandon realized at once. The eaters wore casual clothes, and were, Brandon thought, rough-looking. They took their seats in silence. One said grace: a skinny, middle-aged man with a patch over one eye. Then they began to wait.

Brandon whispered angrily: "What's this? Who are these people?"

Po replied, simply: "They are criminals, who have regretted their actions, yet who do not seek to deny them."

"And they won't notice a drop more sin, either, I suppose?"

The old man looked up at him in surprise. "You misunderstand. These are not sin-eaters. The woman's sin is all gone: you can feel a portion of it in your belly. These are virtue-eaters."

Brandon stared at him, speechless

"You see," the old man continued, "to follow the eightfold path one must let go of both virtue and sin. There are no virtues. There are no sins. There are only right and wrong acts. This woman will lose both virtue and sin, and be free to move on to the next... course. Our rough-edged friends there will have a taste of virtue. They choose not to follow the path. It is well enough. All must make their

own choices. But surely they deserve a taste of virtue as well as sin. And the business parties? They get a good meal and a look at a naked body." He opened his weathered hands; the fingers unfurled like slender petals. "Everybody's happy."

A short while later, Seward led the way into another room, where another woman lay on the table, her body laden with sweets. If any of the party noticed the old scars on the woman's wrists, no one mentioned it; if they noticed a sour, sick feeling in their stomachs, even worse than before, no one spoke of it. And if any of them noticed that someone was missing from their party, no one mentioned that either.

In another room, Brandon lay naked on a table, his eyes closed, listening to the sound of rain, breathing the scented air, and smiling. As the first of the waiters hovered silently over him with a pair of salad-tongs, Brandon said to himself: "Better late than never."

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Alexander Glass's most recent of many appearances in these pages was with the long story "The Watcher's Curse" (IZ 162). An *Interzone* discovery of some years ago, he lives in London and has recently been working on a novel.

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# Ravens

*Stephen Dedman*

**I**t was a beautiful day, the end of August, and the sky was a deep rich blue, but that didn't make me feel any better about being put on suicide duty. The car drove around the hospital looking for a parking spot twice before Sylvia over-rode the autopilot and parked outside the ER. She checked the details on the compad, then walked to the reception desk. "I'm Sylvia Manning, Forecasting and Prevention Squad, LAPD," she said, flashing her ID at the nurse. "This is Cadet Officer Garcia. May we speak to Dr Lester?"

The nurse looked at our cards, then at the monitor. "She's doing rounds. Immunology." He gave us directions, and Sylvia thanked him while I smiled mutely. It took us a few minutes to find Lester, and maybe twice as long to persuade her that we needed to see her privately. "What is it?" she snapped, closing her office door behind her.

"It's your daughter, Melissa," said Sylvia, levelly. "There's a 46 percent probability that she's going to attempt suicide in the next three weeks, with a 79 percent probability of success or serious injury."

Lester stared at her, blood draining from her face, and sat down hurriedly. "I thought it was about one of my patients," she muttered. "Are you sure? How do you know?"

Sylvia glanced at me; she's been with the Ravens for years, but I know more about the software. "She's been seen on Metrorail platforms after the train has left," I replied. "Alone. True, she could have been waiting for someone, but no one ever turned up."

"Probably her boyfriend," said Lester. "Theatre arts student; he's not what you'd call reliable."

"Our data suggests that they broke up some time last week."

Lester swore under her breath. "She didn't tell me, but

I've been busy. Did she show any sign of actually jumping?"

"No," said Sylvia. "This just indicates that she's considered it, but we think she's likely to choose some other method."

I nodded. "The other indicators aren't as conclusive – her buying habits, mostly. As a pre-med, she's in a high-risk group, but it wasn't until it was correlated with the Metrorail data that the probability went over 40 percent."

Summer break was almost over, and I found myself wondering if Melissa Lester had actually wanted to study medicine, or whether she felt pressured by family tradition. The expression on her mother's face suggested that she was thinking the same thing. "What can I do?" she asked. She listened without arguing or asking for much clarification, and we were back in the car barely ten minutes later.

I plugged the compad into the autopilot, and the car started up and headed south. "I wish you'd reconsider," Sylvia said, after a long silence. "You couldn't be better qualified for this section, and we'd hate to lose you."

I shook my head. I'd been in the UCLA Police Reserve for three years – it was the easiest way of paying my tuition – and while I'd listed the Ravens on my preferences as soon as I got out of uniform, a semester's worth of weekend and night shifts and four weeks of my vacation was more than enough. "I want to find out how other sections work," I lied.

"Who've you applied for?"

"Computer Crime."

"The Geek Squad? You'll never get in; they've got a waiting list from here to Seattle, and computing's only your minor, right?" I nodded; computer statistical mod-

elling had seemed a sensible back-up for a sociology degree. Maybe I should've done a double major. "Forecasting's so new that if you stick with it, you'll be fast-tracked for promotion," she continued. "If you leave now, your time here will be wasted; if you wait a couple of years and get your degree, you'll be able to transfer as a sergeant, at least."

I didn't reply. The car pulled into a parking lot outside a tower block on Inez. It shouldn't have looked like a slum, but somehow it managed. It was an improvement on the places I remember seeing when I was a kid – armourglass had replaced security screens, the cameras were hidden, and the murals covered with a graffiti-proof layer – but there was something unconvincing about the gardens, the murals, the pastel colours. Or maybe it was just me.

The corridor smelled clean and unhappy, even worse than the hospital, as did the lift. Sylvia smiled slightly at the muzak – the theme from *M\*A\*S\*H*; I'd told her a few days before that the muzak in places like this is sponsored by the TV stations, presumably to encourage people to spend as much time as possible in front of the set rather than going out. She'd wondered aloud what they played in the lifts at the banks or the stock exchange; "If I Were a Rich Man," maybe, or "Money, Money" from *Cabaret*. The lift went straight to the fourth floor and another clean, empty corridor.

Molly Kearsley's apartment was slightly larger than mine, and just as well soundproofed – the world outside disappeared as soon as Sylvia shut the door behind us – and the furniture was just as old and cheap-looking. The air-conditioner hadn't quite removed the smells of tobacco and pot.

"What's she done now?" Kearsley asked, as she turned the TV off. "Oh, come on," she said, as Sylvia hesitated. "I know plainclothes cops when I see them, and she didn't come home last night. Is she okay?" She sounded weary rather than concerned, until she saw the look on my face. "Is she?"

We showed her our ID cards anyway; she merely glanced at them. "Is it unusual for Bethany not to come home?" asked Sylvia, levelly.

Kearsley shrugged, sat down in an armchair facing the TV, and reached for the packet of cigarettes on the table nearby. She didn't invite us to sit. "It depends. She's usually back by about three or four, but sometimes she goes out with friends... you still haven't told me what she's supposed to have done."

"We're from Forecasting and Prevention," Sylvia told her, reaching for her wallet and showing her her ID. Kearsley raised her eyebrows at this, then sat back in the chair. "Okay," she said. "What is she going to do?"

"There's a 57 percent probability that Bethany will overdose some time in the next month," Sylvia replied. "It may be accidental, or it may be a suicide attempt. In either case, there's a 64 percent that it will be fatal if she doesn't get help in time."

Kearsley's hands shook slightly as she lit the cigarette. "How do you know?"

Sylvia glanced at me, and I told her what I knew, read-

ing from the compad. "Buying habits," muttered Kearsley sourly, and I tried not to wince. The compad said that Molly Kearsley was 34, old enough to have joined in the privacy protests of a couple of decades ago, but she'd been a registered addict in those days, and her file hadn't said anything about her being political.

"What the Hell has she been buying?" she asked, at last.

"I don't know," said Sylvia. "Our computer correlates data and comes up with probabilities, and it only gives us the probabilities; we'd need a court order to get all the details – and we'd need Bethany's permission before we disclosed them to you."

"Jesus. Okay, what am I supposed to do? I don't have any control over her."

"You're still legally responsible for her, in some regards," said Sylvia quietly.

"Don't I know it," snarled Kearsley. "Every time you arrest her, you bring her back here."

"The courts are very reluctant to impose custodial sentences on minors, especially for non-violent crimes."

"You could register her as an addict."

"She's on a waiting list."

Kearsley shook her head. "I was using when she was conceived; I didn't know I was pregnant until I was four months gone. She won't listen to me; why should she? There's nothing I can do with her."

"We're not here to punish anyone," said Sylvia gently. "We just want to warn you, so that you're better prepared."

"Prepared for what?" Kearsley looked at us, her face red, tears in her eyes.

Sylvia didn't flinch; she never does. "If you were the first to find her... say, if she attempted suicide at home, or had an overdose here... would you know what to do?"

"Call an ambulance?"

"Are you insured? Callers with insurance are given priority over suicides and ODs."

"I can't afford insurance." She said it as though she thought we already knew, which we did, then her face darkened. "If you're trying to sell –"

"No," said Sylvia, cutting her short. "The premiums for a potentially suicidal addict are horrendous; neither you nor Bethany's father could afford them." The way she spoke, you never would have guessed that the insurance companies owned a controlling share of the LAPD; I wondered if Kearsley knew. "It would help if you had some first-aid training; I know it's rather expensive, but it may help to save your daughter's life –" I watched Kearsley's face carefully, to see if I could see how she reacted to that, tell which way she was likely to jump. "– or someone else's," Sylvia continued, hardly missing a beat.

Kearsley nodded, but her expression remained sour. "I can see that, but... is there anything else? Do you know when she's likely to try something? Or how I can tell?"

"The 57 percent probability is for the next month; it will be re-assessed every day. We can let you know if it changes. The most likely method is a heroin overdose; it may be very difficult being sure that it wasn't an accident. There's another thing you might consider," she added, as though it were an afterthought. "Ambulance crews give higher priority to registered organ donors, at



no extra cost —” Kearsley looked blank. “Bethany isn’t old enough to sign a valid contract, but under the new laws, you can register her.”

I braced myself in case she erupted, but Sylvia had read her better than I could, as always. Kearsley just sat there, silently. Sylvia reached out for the compad, which I handed to her. “All we need is your signature, or thumbprint, on this form,” she said.

Kearsley took the pad, and stared at the screen. Her employment and prison records listed her as literate with a normal-range IQ. “What’s this about compensation?” she asked.

“No ambulance or hospital costs in the event of her death, as long as she’s HIV negative,” Sylvia replied. “If any of her organs can be used, there’s a rebate of two to five thousand dollars to cover funeral expenses. It’s designed to pay for any cosmetic treatment if you were planning an open-casket funeral” — Kearsley didn’t quite snort, but it was a near thing — “but that’s up to you. We don’t expect grieving parents to provide receipts, or anything of that sort; it’s just a courtesy payment. Donors can be cremated by the hospital at no expense, if that’s what you’d prefer. Of course, this also improves your own eligibility for a transplant should either you or Bethany require one.”

Kearsley looked slightly dazed, then touched the pad. Sylvia’s expression remained sombre. “I’ll leave you some information about first-aid courses available in this area,” she said softly, after retrieving the pad. “Thank you for your time.”

We walked out a few minutes later. The lift was singing that it couldn’t rain all the time. Neither of us spoke until we were back in the car. “Coffee?” suggested Sylvia, glancing at the clock. “My treat?”

“Okay.”

“I’m not even sure I want to stay with the police after I graduate,” I said, as the car headed west, “and I know I can’t keep doing this job.” I sipped at the coffee. “Fore-casting is one thing, but getting parents to sell their kids’ organs...”

Sylvia sighed. “I don’t like it either, but the section has to pay for itself somehow; it’s not as though we can sell footage to the networks like the SWATs or Vice. Besides, we’ve reduced the number of successful youth suicide attempts by nearly 30 percent, and less than one in 50 gets harvested...”

“You never worry that some parents might decide their kids are worth more brain-dead than healthy?”

She shrugged. “Some of them probably think that anyway. Sure, there are better solutions. If more people registered as donors, or the presumed consent laws were widened to include more organs, there wouldn’t be the demand there is now... but then, people like Kearsley wouldn’t be able to afford an ambulance.”

“Maybe that’s wrong, too.”

“Maybe, but it’s an imperfect world; if it wasn’t, we’d be out of a job. Look, I don’t enjoy suicide duty either; I don’t think anybody does, no matter how many lives it saves. I don’t like dealing with stalkers, either, but I’d

rather do that than wait and bust them for rape. I know it’s not glamorous, but I think the Ravens actually do a damn sight more good than we’re given credit for.”

Sick as I was feeling, I couldn’t disagree. Suicides in subways, which used to be disturbingly frequent, weren’t just a matter of the right to die; they traumatized everyone who saw them. Car theft too often led to high-speed chases, which led to deaths. Smart surveillance systems had dramatically reduced both. They also cut down on shoplifting, which reduced prices; that may sound trivial, but it was very popular, especially when people were told that the security cameras in changing booths were now feeding low-resolution pictures to computers, not cheesecake for security teams’ Christmas-party videos. Fingerprint smartlocks raised a few eyebrows when they were introduced in airports and railway stations as an anti-terrorist measure, but many large businesses now used them. It was the same with data about people’s spending habits; while some protested about how much the government wanted to know about them, most helped banks and credit companies and advertising agencies and other commercial organizations gather information about their personal tastes. Some people were more cautious about medical information, but the insurance companies managed to persuade them that it would make premiums lower for most. Centralized datapools made life easier, safer, more comfortable; the pro-privacy protesters didn’t really have a chance, and even though I’ve studied the issue, I can’t really understand what all the fuss was about. “It’s not that,” I said. “It’s me. I just don’t think I’m cut out to be a cop.”

“What do you want to be?”

“I was thinking of teaching.”

Sylvia sighed. “Stick with the Ravens until you’re a sergeant, then if you still want to teach, apply to the academy to become an instructor. There’s already too many professors who don’t know shit about the real world; with a degree and hands-on experience, you should be able to write your own ticket. And take it from me, the job does get easier once you get over the shock.” She was silent for a while. “You’re still on for tonight, aren’t you?”

“Sure.” They were throwing a farewell party for all of the student reserves, to give us time to recover from our hangovers before returning to college on Monday.

“Good.” She looked at the compad. “Kenji Sekizawa. Do you speak any Japanese?”

The last call of the day was the worst. Telling mothers about their kids is hard, but we do a lot of it, because even when they’re not being melodramatic, teenagers aren’t as good at covering their tracks as they think they are. That’s the main reason we haven’t had much success with geriatrics; Mr Sekizawa was completely stunned to be told that there was a 53 percent chance that his 80-year-old father would commit suicide in the next two months. But the worst ones are those where there’s no one around who’s interested in helping; no family, no doctor, no priest or rabbi, no known friends, only a boss who had to call up a personnel file to know who were talking

about and whose immediate response was to offer the man stress leave. I'd tried to convince him that that was probably the worst thing he could do, that it would increase the probability of a successful suicide attempt by at least 17 percent, but I don't think I succeeded. I was in a foul mood when we returned to the car, and wanted to beg off the party, but going home alone probably wouldn't have been the best thing for me to do, either. But that's my excuse for getting as drunk as I did – that, and an argument with an attractive coed who'd been working in Vice. I'd become angry when she referred to us as the Ravens, even though it's what we call ourselves. Maybe it was the way she said it, but it reminded me that ravens aren't just birds of ill omen; they're also scavengers. Anyway, I certainly hadn't intended to wind up in bed with Sylvia, but I did.

An hour later, we were lying in her bed staring at the ceiling for a while. "Sorry," I said. "A little too much to drink."

"It's okay," she said. "You've had a difficult day; you're just stressed. Would you like a back-rub?"

"Okay," I said, after a moment's thought, and rolled over. "How long did it take you to get used to this? The job, I mean?"

I could feel her shrug, then she began kneading my muscles. "For me, it's a bit like a funeral; makes me want to say 'fuck it' and go on living a bit harder. Jesus, when was the last time you had a massage?"

"I don't remember."

She called for the lights, and grabbed a bottle of oil from the nightstand. I felt myself begin to relax as she knelt astride me and placed her palms on my back, rotating them gently – then, a moment later, she stopped, and I felt her fingers trace the scars on my back.

"I had two kidney transplants, a few years ago," I said. "The first one came from my father, but I was put on the waiting list for donor kidneys. I don't know where the other one came from; they're careful not to tell you." I tried to smile. "So I'm very much in favour of people becoming organ donors – but I don't want to force anyone into it."

"Jesus," she said. She touched my shoulders gently, and her hands jerked away as though they were hot. "Do you want me to stop?"

"Not unless you want to," I said. "Sorry if just I tensed up, but it was feeling wonderful." I reached behind me for her hand, held it, then brought it to my lips and kissed it. That's when I saw the scar on her wrist – faint, obviously old, but unmistakably a slash along the artery.

**Stephen Dedman's** previous stories for *Interzone* were "A Single Shadow" (issue 131) and "The Lady Macbeth Blues" (issue 148). He lives in Perth, Western Australia, and has a growing reputation based on his stories in Australian and American magazines and his two published novels to date (both from Tor Books, USA).

# PARALLAX VIEW

## Keith Brooke & Eric Brown

foreword by Stephen Baxter  
Illustrations by Dominic Harrison

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For purposes of argument, grant that extraterrestrial aliens are a centrally important feature of science fiction. Also recall a standard model of the three elements of writing: an author to write, a subject matter to write about, and an audience to read what the author has written. Then, we can deduce the existence of three possible forms of science fiction.

First, *stories in which the purported author is an alien*. Such works exist, though they aren't as numerous as one might think; I remembered only Edgar Rice Burroughs's *A Fighting Man of Mars* and H. B. Hickey's "Gone Are the Lupo," while the erudite members of the Fictionmags discussion group nominated others like Fritz Leiber's "The Bump," Jody Scott's *Passing for Human*, and Sheila Finch's "Nor Unbuild the Cage."

Second, *stories in which the subject matter is a purported alien or aliens*. No examples necessary!

Third, *stories in which the purported audience consists of aliens*. Here, we arrive at the peculiar form of science fiction sponsored and promoted by the United States's National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

To understand the strange and sorry history of humanity's efforts to communicate with aliens, one must consult three texts: *The Cosmic Connection: An Extraterrestrial Perspective* by Carl Sagan (1973), which in part discusses the plaque placed on the *Pioneer 10* space probe; *Murmurs of Earth: The Voyager Interstellar Record* by Carl Sagan with Frank Drake, Ann Druyan, Timothy Ferris, Jon Lomberg and Linda Salzman Sagan (1978), which describes the compilation of spoken words, photographs and music attached to the *Voyager* space probes; and *Deep Time: How Humanity Communicates Across Millennia* by Gregory Benford (1999), which in part chronicles an abortive attempt to attach a diamond medallion to the *Cassini* space probe. These fascinating accounts explain why these messages, properly contextualized as forms of science fiction, have been consistently unsatisfactory, even dysfunctional, in fulfilling their announced goals.

The story begins in the 1960s with Frank Drake, who describes in *Murmurs of Earth* how he hit upon the notion of broadcasting a message to aliens by means of dots and dashes, similar to Morse code. If the total number of dots and dashes was the product of two prime numbers, like 551, aliens could figure out that this represented a rectangular gridwork of 29 by 19 units and could construct an informative picture with 551 tiny squares alternately coloured black and white. The picture that Drake devised included a crude picture of a person – a figure with a head, two arms, and two legs – along with symbolic representations that aliens

would recognize as the numbers one through five, our solar system, and our carbon-based biology. Or so Drake maintained. In fact, given aliens who would know absolutely nothing about the message's senders, they would be just as likely to spend years trying to interpret the figure of a person as a chemical formula and that series of numerical dots as our self-portrait – assuming that they could figure out the transformation from code to picture in the first place. Give Drake points for originality, but the approach was not promising.

Carl Sagan became involved in 1971, when he realized that the *Pioneer 10* space probe, destined to be shot into interstellar space after passing by Jupiter, could carry a physical message to aliens who might encounter the probe millions of years from now. After persuading NASA that the project was worthwhile, Sagan, Drake and Linda Salzman Sagan designed the *Pioneer 10* plaque that briefly emerged as a cultural icon. The left side of the plaque, more decipherably than Drake's coded message, showed

Earth's position in space, the solar system, and some numbering and measuring conventions. The right side of the plaque, to show aliens what we looked like, famously displayed a naked man waving in greeting next to a naked woman.

At the time, Sagan undoubtedly envisioned the plaque as little more than another contribution to a long, private discussion among astronomers regarding the best ways to communicate with aliens; but it unexpectedly inspired some public debate and discussion. As Sagan said in *The Cosmic Connection*,

The golden greeting card placed aboard the *Pioneer 10* spacecraft was intended for the remote contingency that representatives of an advanced extraterrestrial civilization, some time in the distant future, might encounter this first artifact of mankind to leave the Solar System. But the message has had a more immediate impact. It has already been meticulously studied – not by extraterrestrials, but by terrestrials. Human beings all over the planet Earth have examined the message, applauded it, criticized it, interpreted it, and proposed alternative messages.

Indeed, those reactions were so extensive that the paperback edition of *The Cosmic Connection* devotes only four pages to the plaque as "A Message from Earth" and twelve pages to the plaque as "A Message to Earth." Sagan concluded from this that "The greater significance of the *Pioneer 10* plaque is not as a message to out there; it is as a message to back here."

And herein lies the first major problem that has consistently bedeviled this activity.

Invariably, writers respond more to visible, vocal readers than to invisible, silent readers. An author may first resolve to write for posterity, but her work will ultimately be shaped and influenced primarily by the people around her who send letters and review her books. As long as talking to aliens was an astronomers' parlour game, the participants could focus on aliens; but as soon as the public started paying attention to the process, they became the messages' principal audience.

Thus, a significant though unheralded shift occurred in Sagan's outlook: instead of a serious scientific project to communicate with probable nonhuman civilizations, the messages were reconceived as a novel way to convey the essence of the human condition, from the vantage point of imagined aliens, for the enjoyment and enlightenment of modern humans. In other words, these messages became a form of science fiction, representing an old tradition of stories that brought alien visitors to Earth to react to contemporary conditions – as in works ranging from Voltaire's *Micromégas* to Gore Vidal's *Visit to a Small Planet* or even

## Talking to Aliens – and to Ourselves

Gary Westfahl

the television series *Mork and Mindy*. The new wrinkle here was that these aliens were asked not to visit the Earth, but only receive and respond to a message from Earth.

Viewed in this way, sending messages to aliens might seem a stimulating new sub-genre emerging from an intriguing question: what is it about humanity that aliens might find most noteworthy, most surprising, most reprehensible? Voltaire and Vidal delivered effective social commentary with such a device, and one is also reminded of I. F. Stone's pugnacious response to another NASA-sponsored message to possible aliens, the statement on the plaque brought to the moon by the *Apollo 11* astronauts:

HERE MEN FROM THE PLANET EARTH  
FIRST SET FOOT UPON THE MOON  
JULY 1969 A.D.  
WE CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND

Stone's suggested alternative:

HERE MEN FIRST SET FOOT OUTSIDE THE  
EARTH ON THEIR WAY TO THE FAR STARS.  
THEY SPEAK OF PEACE BUT WHEREVER  
THEY GO THEY BRING WAR. THE ROCKETS  
ON WHICH THEY ARRIVED WERE  
DEVELOPED TO CARRY INSTANT DEATH  
AND CAN WITHIN A FEW MINUTES TURN  
THEIR GREEN PLANET INTO ANOTHER  
LIFELESS MOON. THEIR DESTRUCTIVE  
INGENUITY KNOWS NO LIMITS AND THEIR  
WANTON POLLUTION NO RESTRAINT.

LET THE REST OF THE UNIVERSE BEWARE

The trouble with this potentially exciting genre is that messages to aliens on NASA space probes represent very expensive projects paid for by millions of American taxpayers, all of them easily offended or upset in innumerable ways. Under such constraints, any wit, insight or social commentary along the lines of Voltaire, Vidal or Stone will inexorably be stripped away.

Consider, for example, some of the negative responses to the *Pioneer 10* plaque. After a picture of it appeared in *The Los Angeles Times*, a woman wrote to complain that the images of naked people were "filth" being sent to space; she disliked the message because she thought it communicated wantonness. One person worried that, coupled with images of World War II broadcast by television into space, aliens might interpret the man's raised hand as a Nazi salute – and as an aggressive warning; he disliked the message because he thought it communicated belligerence. Since only the man was waving, and since the woman was shorter than the man, feminists thought this suggested male dominance; they disliked the message because they thought it communicated sexism. A columnist complained that NASA had effectively established an "intergalactic foreign policy" of rash openness, announcing our presence and

location to potentially hostile aliens looking for new worlds to conquer; he disliked the message because he thought it communicated naïveté. And these were all responses to *unintentional* meanings in the message; imagine the indignation that would have ensued if Sagan had tried to *deliberately* slip something less than completely complimentary to humanity into the picture.

And this is the second major problem in our efforts to communicate with aliens: envisioned not simply as messages principally for humans, but also as messages that must *please* all humans, they have become bland, unfocused, unilluminating, resembling NASA's dull moon plaque more than Stone's ornery variation, the cosmic equivalents of air-brushed graduation pictures or encomia inscribed on tombstones.

So it was that when Sagan, Drake and Linda Salzman Sagan, along with new collaborators Ann Druyan, Timothy Ferris and Jon Lomberg, began to create a more elaborate message for the *Voyager* space probes – a long-playing record with sounds and pictures – they had two principles firmly in mind. First, they would primarily speak to their fellow humans, not to aliens; *Murmurs of Earth* approvingly quotes Bernard Oliver's observation that "There is only an infinitesimal chance that [the message] will ever be seen by a single extraterrestrial, but it will certainly be seen by billions of terrestrials. Its real function, therefore, is to appeal to and expand the human spirit, and to make contact with extraterrestrial intelligence a welcome expectation of mankind." Second, they would relentlessly accentuate the positive so as to offend no one; Sagan asked, "Is it a mistake to put our best face to the cosmos? Why not a hopeful rather than a despairing view of humanity and its possible future?" These priorities must be understood to explain a project that, regarded solely as a message to aliens, is utterly senseless.

What did Sagan and his colleagues decide to include on their little record? First, as everyone knows, they compiled a collage of "Sounds of Earth" along with a selection of Earth's greatest music, ranging from aborigine songs and Bach to Louis Armstrong and Chuck Berry. This seems an odd choice for one simple reason: while it is hard to imagine a technological civilization developed by beings without a sense of sight – since that is how we obtain about 90% of our information – it is easy to imagine such a civilization developed by beings without a sense of hearing – especially if it arose on a world with a thin atmosphere where sound carried so poorly as to serve as an inconsequential source of data. In other words, Sagan and friends may have literally assembled a symphony for the deaf.

However, despite lengthy rhetoric in *Murmurs of Earth* about music as both a uniquely mathematical and a uniquely emotional form of communication, the focus on music actually reflected one simple consideration: music is the most content-free, and hence the least objectionable, form of human expression. Consider, for example, what would have happened if Sagan and his colleagues had elected to compile a portfolio of the world's greatest artworks. El Greco's *The Assumption of the Virgin*? No religious imagery. Michelangelo's *David*? No full-frontal nudity. Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*? Left-wing political propaganda. Jackson Pollack's *Convergence*? "Why, my six-year-old son can paint better than that." And so on. No, the emphasis on music was based on political expediency, not scientific logic.

Second, the *Voyager* record featured 120 photographs including numerous diagrams of human biology and physiology and a series of random pictures of humans all over the world engaged in various activities. Yet an intelligent civilization will surely learn to associate sequence with cause-and-effect, and noticing that several brief series of photographs are clearly in chronological order, they would struggle to interpret all 120 photographs as one continuous narrative, without success. Wouldn't it have been more reasonable to employ a series of pictures depicting a typical human life from womb to tomb, showing a fetus, a baby, a small child in school, a graduating high school senior, an adult at work, a parent with children, a senior citizen, and finally a burial? But that would have meant choosing to feature a man or a woman, an American in a suit or an Amazonian in a loincloth, and any possible choice would have led to indignant criticism from those who felt they were not being represented. Thus, while the random snapshots represented a confusing injustice to alien interpreters, their deliberate avoidance of coherence and narrative served the purposes of human creators striving to avoid conflict at all costs.

Finally, the *Voyager* message featured recorded greetings from 54 representatives from the United Nations, all of them essentially saying "hello" to the aliens in their own languages. Now, it may or may not be possible for alien linguists to figure out how to translate and understand one of our languages, but the best way to assist them would have been to include a lengthy discourse in a single language; snippets of dozens of different languages would almost certainly be impossible to decipher, and the greetings are so consistently banal that even sophisticated aliens who figured out how to do it would probably abandon the task as a valueless exercise. However, as Linda Salzman Sagan noted in *Murmurs of Earth*, "We were principally



concerned with the needs of people on Earth during this section of the recording," and selecting English as the sole method of communication would have angered too many non-English speakers.

Overall, while one can readily criticize the *Voyager* record on several grounds, Sagan and his colleagues must be praised for navigating the treacherous waters of bureaucracy and public opinion to actually get their message into space. The next time a team of scientists would attempt to send a message to aliens, they would not be so successful.

In the 1990s, Lomberg became involved in another message to aliens that seemed more sensible: a CD-ROM, to be carried on a Russian Mars mission, featuring 73 stories and 54 images conveying human impressions of Mars. This at least would give future aliens enough information to gain some significant knowledge about humanity. Unfortunately, the Russian Mars probe misfired and plunged into the Pacific Ocean, its CD-ROM perhaps destined to someday enlighten – or baffle – a future race of intelligent fish. In the meantime Lomberg, along with NASA scientist Caroline Porco and Gregory Benford, had launched another project to include a message on the *Cassini* space probe to a possible future civilization on Saturn's moon Titan, as is fully described in Benford's *Deep Time*.

They decided to create a new version of the *Pioneer 10* plaque on a small diamond medallion that could endure indefinitely in the harsh environment of Titan. One side would feature a number of astronomical diagrams and photographs to identify the origin and age of the medallion; the other side would feature a stereo photograph of several humans at a beach, ranging in age from children to senior citizens. In making their plans, they inherited the two dangerous principles developed by Sagan. First, they would primarily address other humans, not aliens; Benford said that "Perhaps the most important audience would be not distant generations, but ourselves." Second, they would make the message unflinchingly positive – "understandable, optimistic, and awe-inspiring."

The resulting photograph, reproduced in *Deep Time*, gives new meaning to the phrase "political correctness." Recalling that feminists had objected to the apparent subordination of the woman on the *Pioneer 10* plaque, Porco suggested that an elderly woman serve as the central figure; recalling complaints about the nudity of the figures, they decided to have the adults and older children dressed normally, while two small children would be naked to inoffensively display human anatomy to alien viewers. (This struck me as strange; surely, if the photograph had ever reached the public, that same woman in Los Angeles might

have written to complain that NASA was now dispatching "child pornography" to other worlds.) All races are represented, there are equal numbers of men and women, and everyone appears to be getting along rather splendidly.

Unfortunately, as Benford wryly notes, the people involved in this project did not get along nearly so well. First, Porco abruptly dismissed Benford from the project; later, when the diamond medallion was almost ready to go, she aggressively asserted that she should receive sole credit for the medallion even though Lomberg had done most of the creative work. As an ugly dispute erupted between Porco and Lomberg's supporters, cautious NASA administrators decided to end the controversy by removing the medallion from the *Cassini* mission.

Although one can blame the project's cancellation on Porco's blind ambition, the experience actually illustrates a third major problem in sending alien messages that has emerged only after the death of Carl Sagan. In true scientific research – which such messages supposedly represent – collaborative work followed by collaborative credit is the norm; in describing the brainstorming sessions that led to the medallion, Benford remarks that "Such free-for-all are one of the best aspects of scientific collaboration, spirited and enjoyable. They are quite the opposite of how other creative people work, as in the classic image of solitary, agonized artists." However, in the creation of science fiction – which such messages have become – there is a natural tendency for one leading agent to seek the lion's share of the credit, and a natural tendency for the public to identify one person as the principal author. In this respect, Sagan was lucky: he could frequently and effusively praise his collaborators for their contributions, in the manner of a true scientist, but he also recognized that, as the celebrity in the group, he would always be regarded as the guiding force behind the messages regardless of how much he shared the credit. After years of bureaucratic infighting within NASA, Porco may have believed that she deserved a turn in the spotlight, so that she could emerge as Sagan's successor, another prominent and effective proponent of space exploration and research. Perhaps she was not suited for the role, but creating and promoting messages to aliens may become more common in the future as scientists, like Porco, come to view the activity as a way to achieve fame and fortune.

My overall conclusions? First, it is important to separate the tasks of sending alien messages to talk to aliens and sending alien messages to talk to ourselves. Both goals are worthwhile, but

attempting to accomplish both of them at once, in a manner that is amenable to absolutely everyone, is leading to results that are unsatisfactory across the board.

When we address representatives of an extraterrestrial civilization, of course, nothing is certain, but two assumptions are reasonable: first, in order to communicate among themselves, aliens will certainly develop, and recognize, languages; second, in order to master science and technology, they will have to develop an understanding of causes leading to effects, which represent the simplest form of narrative. This suggests that aliens might most enjoy and benefit from human stories. Our experiences on Earth also support the idea: while the art, music and dance of distant countries and cultures have penetrated western culture only fitfully, stories from all nations and all periods of human histories have found their way to every library and bookstore, so that a modern British child may grow up reading American science fiction, French picture books, adaptations of African folk tales, and stories from Greek, Norse, and Indian mythology. Thus, the best sort of message for aliens would resemble the CD-ROM that never made it to Mars: a collection of the world's greatest literature, all translated into one language chosen by the launching nation. With several million words on the disk, aliens might even be able to figure out English.

When we address ourselves while pretending to address extraterrestrials, the important thing to remember is that this is science fiction, not science, and as such will be best produced by "solitary, agonized artists" instead of committees of scientists and bureaucrats. Following up on one of Benford's ideas, NASA might invite individuals to submit their own proposals for alien messages, building and attaching the best ones to all forthcoming space probes. If NASA has the gumption to embrace the ideas in their original, idiosyncratic forms without attempting to dilute, homogenize, or prettify them, the results might be a fascinating stream of imaginative commentaries on the human condition that could enliven the pages of Sunday newspapers – and provoke letters from irate citizens.

Finally, even if we fail to clutter the heavens with both meaningful and meaningless messages to aliens, we might consider this endeavour, more modestly, simply as another fruitful type of science fiction for the printed page. Stories for aliens might be just as involving and entertaining as stories by or stories about aliens. It is an activity that everyone might be well advised to practice as often as possible in as many forms as possible – both as a way to better understand ourselves and as preparation for a possible future time when we discover actual aliens to converse with.

Gary Westfahl



## REVIEWED

## In the Woods

Paul McAuley

Once upon a time there was a hole. And in that hole lived... Well, you almost certainly know who. After all, we're talking about the prequel to what has been declared to be, by popular vote here in Britain, the best novel of the last century. We're talking about the most influential model for modern fantasy novels, although it isn't J. R. R. Tolkien's fault that most of his hundred upon hundred imitators are not, as far as this (prejudiced – sue me) reviewer is concerned, very good.

But there is another model.

Once upon a time there was a wild wood (or was it a wardrobe?). And in that wood (or wardrobe) there lived a world. The wardrobe belongs to Tolkien's drinking buddy C. S. Lewis; the wood, though, is Robert Holdstock's, and with his latest novel *Holdstock* cements his reputations as the best English fantasy writer since Alan Garner.

The wood is Ryhope Wood, a revenant of the Great Forest which once covered Britain. Larger inside than out, like Dr Who's *Tardis*, and populated by mythagos, primal yet multifaceted elements of myth, it's a feral, spooky, and thoroughly exhilarating arena of Story. Ryhope Wood has been partially mapped but not yet exhausted by novels such as *Mythago Wood*, *Lavondyss* and *The Hollowing*, and we are not very far into the plot of Holdstock's new novel, *Celtika: Book One of The Merlin Codex*

(Earthlight, £16.99), when we realize that it is something of a prequel to the *Mythago Wood* series.

Somewhere in pre-Christian history, far in the wintry north, Merlin, here a relatively young enchanter, is searching for his old comrade Jason, of Jason and the Argonauts, who on his death was entombed with his ship, the *Argo*, in a deep cold lake. Merlin has learned that Jason's two sons were not after all killed by their mother, Medea, but sent forward into the future, which is the present of the story; revived by Merlin, Jason sets out to search for them, with the help of a new band of heroes, including a Celtic chieftain who will become an ancestor of King Arthur.

The quest takes them from the far North, past the haunted shores of Ghostland – the British Isles, covered in the vast, primal, mythago-haunted forest of which Ryhope Wood is a revenant – to the Delphic Oracle in Greece. Merlin becomes entangled with a young woman who wants to make use of the magic engraved in his bones, which magic Merlin uses only sparingly, for its use ages him; the *Argo*, rebuilt, has a contrary spirit sealed in her keel; Urtha, the Celtic chieftain, seeks revenge on the man who betrayed his fortress home; the entire company is soon caught up in the march of a great horde which plans to plun-

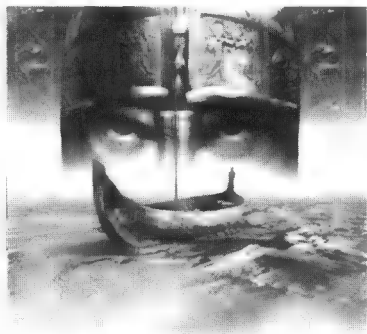
der the riches of ancient Greece.

This intricate story is told with muscular vigour and (unlike many of Tolkien's pale, bloodless imitators) a vital sense of the hard road which heroes must take. Merlin is a strong and wily central character, a fine foil for Jason's sometimes cruel obduracy and Urtha's thirst for revenge, and their world, known to us only by the leathery scraps of bogmen, rusted flakes of long-buried weapons, and the post-holes of mead halls, is brought to life with precise and vivid touches, from the use of fish guts to lubricate the rollers on which a ship is dragged overland, to the limewater-stiffened hair of Urtha and vivid conjuration of three warlords by their costumes:

*Achichoros in his grey wolfskin cloak and falcon-crested helmet, red-bearded, jade-eyed Bolgios in his iron-studded leather armour, Brennos, narrow-eyed, narrow-featured, heavily moustached, his helmet made from the tusks of boars, his short green cloak embroidered with the bloody muzzle of this totem beast.*

As in the *Mythago Wood* series, the story of *Celtika* is dense with allusion and a burgeoning sense of the eternal cycles of myth and fate. There are reversals and betrayals, unexpected unmaskings, and a finely judged ending, part tragedy, part triumph, that brings the breathless narrative to a brief pause before the journey to the haunted shores of Britain, where it seems that Merlin will be more deeply tangled with the Matter of Britain and his own foreshadowed fate. It's a marvellous start to what promises to be an important new fantasy series, and needless to say it is highly recommended.

Although Pat Murphy's *Wild Angel*, by Mary Merriwell, by Max Merriwell (Tor, \$23.95) (and we'll get to the question of this authorial layering by and by) is about a little orphan girl raised by wolves in the California Sierra Mountains during the gold rush, its self-admitted model is not Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, but Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan of the Apes*. Like its model, it's a swiftly paced adventure, kicking off when little Sarah McKensie's parents are murdered by an outlaw who scalps them to make it look as though they were killed by Indians. Sarah escapes and is adopted by a she-wolf who has just lost her cubs. Growing up as a feral wolf-child, she learns the ways of the wolves and the wild mountains, learns the use of tools by observation of other humans, and learns human language from a Native American woman. Befriended by an artist, Max Phillips, she becomes the Wild Angel of the mountains, appearing from nowhere to



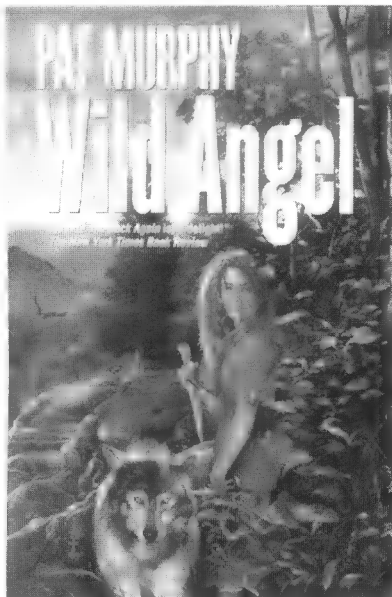
ROBERT HOLDSTOCK

save people from blizzards and bears. While Max plans to reunite Sarah with her aunt, the murderous outlaw, who has greatly prospered, realizes that Sarah still lives and plots to kill her.

Much of this deliberately parallels Tarzan's upbringing in Burroughs's fantasiticated African jungle – there's even an elephant, part of a circus passing through the territory – and *Wild Angel*, its brisk pace carried by short declarative sentences and salted with economic evocations of the California wilderness and life in the goldfields, can certainly be read and enjoyed as a straightforward adventure. But as its triple-layered byline implies, Murphy's intentions are deeper than simply changing the gender of Burroughs's noble savage and relocating her adventures to 19th-century California.

As Murphy explains in her afterword, *Wild Angel* is the middle volume of a thematic trilogy – “a shaggy dog story, a practical joke, and a metafictional opus” – which began with the space opera *There and Back Again* by Max Merriwell (yes, Tolkien again), and which will conclude with Max Merriwell's own adventures. The precise effect on the perspective obtained by casting the story through the sensibility of a man attempting to write as a woman is difficult to judge (although the third volume in this *jeu d'esprit* may make Murphy's intentions clearer, or at least more visible), but permeating the adventures of a woman who like Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (Twain himself has a walk-on part) is an outsider who straightforwardly questions and indeed actively resists the stereotyping enforced by the conventions of civilization, is an intelligent and witty self-engulfing commentary on the genre conventions the narrative pretends to follow.

James Lovegrove's *The Foreigners* (Gollancz, £16.99) sets a traditional murder mystery in a near future where a strange alien invasion has



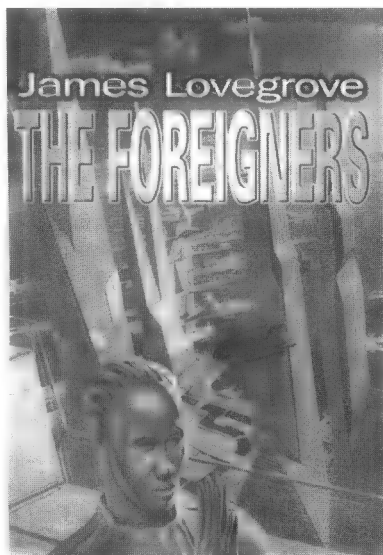
brought about a near utopia, but despite satisfying twists in its plot, it's an uneasy hybrid. The aliens are the enigmatic gold-robed and masked Foreigners who in exchange for the songs of professional Sirens bestow jewels and the secrets of their Crystech technology, which provides a clean and inexhaustible power source, and a quasi-living building material. The mystery is set in New Venice, a resort city grown by Crystech technology off the Mediterranean coast of Africa. Jack Parry, formerly of the Metropolitan police, is the officer of the city's multinational Foreign Policy Police responsible for investigating the murder of a Siren whose body is found in a hotel room next to the empty robes of a Foreigner. But even as Parry tries to discover if this is murder, cross-species suicide, or a terrorist act by the anti-Foreigner Triple-X movement, news of the murder of a second Siren leaks to the press, and he is plunged into deep political waters.

Lovegrove conveys a powerful sense of the clean, hopeful future of which New Venice is the epitome (although he doesn't make as much of the possibilities of the Crystech power source as perhaps he might), and the enigma of the Foreigners, who communicate only with a limited repertoire of hand signals, is carefully sustained (in a clever touch, one of the Foreigners tries and fails to give a crucial explanation to a baffled Parry).

But although Parry is nicely depicted as a self-reflective, dour, old-fashioned policeman in the mould of Colin Dexter's Morse, with an appropriately anguished love life, for much of the novel he is a passive protagonist who rarely seems to be at the centre of events.

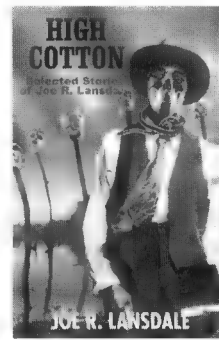
And while Lovegrove extracts some fine comedy from the fact that the Foreign Policy Police have few powers over the citizens of New Venice, the details of the investigation are only vaguely invoked, and the story takes an interminable time to get going.

Weighing in at over 400 pages, *The*



*Foreigners* shows just how easy it is to write a long novel – you just add more words. The clever plot is so buried in long descriptive passages that it's like eating your way through a sofa's worth of stuffing, leaving you with little appetite for the supple twists once the murder mystery gets up a head of steam, the final revelation which turns the story inside out, and the melancholy coda.

Two more single-author collections from that industrious small press, Golden Gryphon, *High Cotton* (Golden Gryphon, \$23.95) is a kind of greatest-hits package self-selected from stories published over the last 17



years by Texan iconoclast Joe R. Lansdale. There are the alternate histories (“Letter from the South, Two Moons West of Nacogdoches,” “Trains not Taken”); there's science fiction (“Tight Little Stitches in a Dead Man's

Back”); most of all there are stories which inhabit the borderland between crime fiction and horror, and most particularly the pine woods, small towns and trailer parks of East Texas.

Mixing black comedy and an acute ear for the vigorous vernacular of his corner of Texas, Lansdale has produced some of the strongest and most original stories of any contemporary American writer, from the gonzo wackiness of “Godzilla's Twelve Step Program” (“After work Godzilla stays away from downtown. He feels tense. To stop blowing flames after work is difficult.”) and “Bob the Dinosaur goes to Hollywood,” to word-perfect depictions of small-town losers, racists, mad preachers and serial killers in “The Pit,” “Steppin' Out, Summer, '68,” “Mister Weed-Eater,” “By Bizarre Hands,” “The Phone Woman,” “The Job” and “Night They Missed the Horror Show.” If you haven't read any Lansdale, get hold of this fine collection as soon as you can; and even if you've read half the stories I've mentioned, it's still worth catching up with the rest.

Richard Paul Russo's stories, collected in *Terminal Visions* (Golden Gryphon, \$23.95), are grainy blowups of human-sized corners of sf's panoramas. Although often set on other planets or in spaceports and spaceships, their scale is entirely human, and their characters are, as Karen Joy Fowler points out in her sympathetic introduction, “struggling with problems that are touchingly human-sized.” In some stories, the calm surface of Russo's prose is





barely ruffled by uncomplicated and unsurprising narratives which never rise above their initial premises; bathos stifles the spark of story. But the best, such as the post-war junkyard jungle excursion of "Liz and Diego," the stripped-down existential claustrophobia of "The Open Boat," the transdimensional road movie of "Just Drive, She Said," and "Lunar Triptych: Embracing the Night," with its sense of exhaustion at the end of manned space-flight, convey with quiet precision a sense of people seeking dignity and definition in lives lived at the edge of vaster matters.

I have never found the hoary silent-movie phrase "Perils of Pauline" more apposite than with regard to Laurell K. Hamilton's latest romp, ***A Kiss of Shadows*** (Ballantine, \$22.95). It concerns the adventures of Meredith NicEssus, princess of the Sidhe, but (owing to mesalliances over several generations) mortal and without significant magic. She is therefore regarded as fair game by most of her relations in the Unseelie (which I would gloss as unhappy or unblest) Court, and has taken refuge in Los Angeles, disguised as a private eye.

Private eyes investigate things, and Merry is called upon to investigate a most unsavoury character who has obtained supplies of a Sidhe aphrodisiac. This substance, having all the qualities once optimistically attributed to Spanish Fly (and being grossly addictive to boot) is illegal everywhere, but actually figures very little in the story, where its principal function is to blow Merry's cover. That necessitates her return to the Unseelie Court and resumption of relations with its capricious ruler, her Aunt Andais, Queen of Air and Darkness (one of the titles of Morgan le Fay, of whom more later).

Auntie is a malevolent character by any standards: a raging nymphomaniac, it's her fancy to impose a regime of celibacy on her personal guard – men and monsters of tremendous physical attraction with appetites to match, and potentially immortal. It makes for an unhappy atmosphere, but all can draw comfort from the reflection that bad as she is, the sort of regime her son, Crown Prince Cel, would institute would surely be much, much worse – like Caligula after Tiberius, as someone mournfully avers. Of course, if Merry were to displace Cel (and survive), all but the most rabid of Cel's faction would rejoice; and of course, though Cel's faction is less numerous, he is much more strongly placed.

The remainder of the book, therefore, consists of a bloody and libidinous court intrigue, precipitated by Andais's pronouncement that the

#### Also noted:

**1984** (Voyant, \$17.95) is a selection of Samuel R. Delany's letters from that year, a significant one for Delany. He was struggling to deal with the financial consequences of a devastating Internal Revenue Service audit; as a gay man given to practising casual sex in Times Square pornographic cinemas, he had a personal interest in attempting to understand the burgeoning AIDS crisis; and he was shepherding two novels into print while writing the fourth and last of his *Return to Neveryon* sequence. In long and detailed letters to friends, to his bibliographers,

to his daughter and to a young man in prison, he exhibits a restless energy and dauntingly wide range of interests, from Wagner and Freud to semiotics, and the lives of hustlers and drug addicts at the margins of society (some of which, transmuted, appears in *Flight from Neveryon*). For anyone interested in the life of the mind of one of our best sf writers and critics, this volume, nicely annotated and with a fine introduction by Kenneth R. James, is both fascinating and essential.

Paul McAuley

## Perils and Lampoons

Chris Gilmore

guards' geas of celibacy will be lifted – with respect to Merry alone. As for Merry... as long as she accepts at least three of the 27 on offer, singly or in such combinations as may strike her as enjoyable, she will have done her duty. A good thing she's descended from at least three fertility gods, and is mildly masochistic by temperament.

Aho! I have occasionally inveighed against the mawkish habit of those publishers who describe books aimed at dimmish ten-year-olds as for "young adults." This is a book for those whom I would so describe: if you're aged 15-18, with a perfervid imagination and very limited experience, it may well afford you solace – it afforded me a few laughs. And if you find it habit-forming, Hamilton is a professional; she ties off all the obvious loose ends, while leaving an obvious lead for a sequel. May you live to outgrow the entire series!

And on the subject of adolescent fantasy... A 14-year-old of noble family is, for reasons which a later volume will presumably disclose, translated to a distant continent and a time over a millennium past. Stranded without resources, he offers his services as a harvest-hand at the first farm he comes to, and is accepted. Invited to a dance that evening, he meets and immediately falls in love with a girl even younger than himself. The feeling being mutual, they make

mutual surrender of virginity – and it's wonderful for both.

Such is the opening of Elizabeth Haydon's ***Rhapsody: Child of Blood*** (Millennium, £6.99), and if that isn't too great a shock to the system, it does get better. The book is volume one of at least three, and the rest is written almost exclusively from the viewpoint of the lady in the case. Inconsolable at being deprived of her teenage lover (who gets whipped back to his own era after less than a day) she goes in search of him, adopts the professional name of Rhapsody while working (from necessity rather than choice) as a prostitute, masters a form of musical magic, and all this before the story proper begins.

Finding her adopted city too hot for her, she takes up with two gruesome-looking companions, becomes embroiled in a tussle between Good and Evil forces, travels in time, acquires a magic sword and further powers (including a major upgrade to her already formidable beauty), but remains at heart the dear, sweet kid she was at the beginning. If this reminds you of a role-play game, I suspect that's intentional, this being a typical example of the Big Commercial Fantasy, and making no bones about its genre. Indeed, I suspect Haydon set out to produce an archetypal example. Even the map follows Tolkien's style of cartography, and she attempts some of the word-games in which he, Jack Vance and Gene Wolfe engage. These generally fail, as she lacks their scholarship and panache. "Roundelay," "Firbolg" and "Cymrian" aren't the commonest words in the language, but they're well enough known for the way she applies them to look careless rather than experimental, and there is no good reason why a magic word which sets a harp to playing itself should be "Thomas" spelt backwards.

This said, when she's not trying to be too clever by half, Haydon writes effectively, and even manages some crude but serviceable humour, especially in a battle-song to the tune of "Home on the Range." Had she tried



something a little less compendious, she might have succeeded better, but even as it is, for the great many people who like this sort of thing, it's a fine example of what they like.

Notoriously, when a blurb-writer is truly stumped for something complimentary and halfway credible to say about a work of broad-screen sf or bcf, he will invoke, respectively, Frank Herbert or Tolkien. It is therefore neither surprising nor a coincidence that the *Harvard Lampoon* chose to honour those genres with *Doon* and *Bored of the Rings*. Given the number of Arthurian pastiches I've had to review over the last few years, it's equally unsurprising that Mark F. Parker should have adopted the *Lampoon's* style of humour (to which I would apply Frank Lehrer's remark about "taking the best-loved songs of the American people and kicking them when they're down") for his own take on *The Sword in the Stone: X-Calibre* (subtitled "The Absurd Legend of Cantiger the Wizard"; Robinson, £6.99).

Now the *Lampoon* style of humour appeals more strongly to snobbery than to wit. You pick up the reference, which makes it funny because you know in your water that other people, of inferior background to yourself, will not – *Honi soit la vache qui rite*, as they say in Cambridge, Mass. The question of whether the reference has any relevance, internal or external, is meanwhile ignored. From this follows its principal weakness, that it's impossible to distinguish those references you happen to have missed from the background noise, of which there is plenty. This book's basic conceit is that sometime in the near future, humanity is decimated by a mutagenic plague, leaving most tradition and all history as scrambled as the genes of the survivors. Impelled by mythopoeic forces, they are come now to reliving the Matter of Britain, but in a very much baser key. Many characters, including the Orkadian Brothers, Cantiger (Merlin), Geneva (Guinevere), Kes (Kai) and Marina (Morgan le Fay), are recognizable, but even more are not. Parallels with Samuel R. Delany's *The Einstein Intersection* are obvious, but should not be drawn – Parker plays it, or attempts to play it, strictly for laughs.

His chosen mode, over and above the *Lampoon*, reads a bit like Robert Rankin through a very coarse filter; but lacking the master's way with an extended joke, he too often descends into self-referential verbosity. At the same time, he often falls into the beginner's trap of taking seriously a story that is only strong enough to play for laughs. Thus the venal, cowardly and incompetent Cantiger frequently gets shouldered aside so that the youthful, serious-minded and gallant

Orson (Arthur) can take stage-centre. The effect is then like Jack Vance on a very bad day indeed. The resulting cocktail, of *Lampoon* garnished with chunks of poor Rankin and weak Vance, sounds unattractive, but may be potable if you're expecting nothing better – the fact is, *Lampoon* is in short supply, and even the scrapings of Rankin and Vance are better than the best of many more pretentious writers. Good for summer quaffing.

And by a pleasing coincidence, the next offering is also a sidelong take on the Matter of Britain, but Jo Walton's *The King's Peace* (Tor, \$26.95) is most emphatically not played for laughs. Her technique is that invented by Alison Spedding and subsequently adopted by Guy Gavriel Kay and Kate Elliott: to take a well-known historical epoch and distort it subtly (especially as regards the prevailing religions). This allows the writer to present encounters between elements that never met, and to change outcomes at will. Its disadvantage is that to purists accustomed to carefully researched historical novels, it will seem a bit too much like tennis without the net.

For Walton, Arthur is Urdo, Britain is Tir Tanagiri, the invading Saxons (Jarn) use the dragon ships of Viking raiders, the Jesus figure of the encroaching religion was stoned rather than crucified, and Plato is known by his true name of Aristokles. Fine by me, but she loses credibility at a single, fundamental level. She makes Elliott's mistake of grafting totally liberated, politically and economically powerful women onto what remains the patriarchal society we know from history, so that the many female prelates, warriors, land-owners

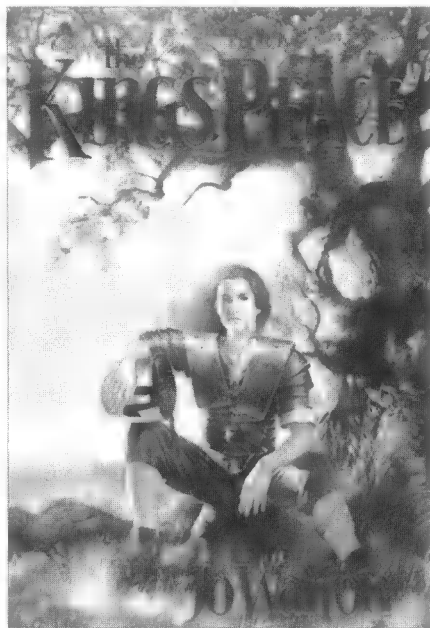
etc. all seem a touch off-key. The peasant-women, a noble but left-over Vincan (Roman)-British matron, witches etc. come over more convincingly, but again, Walton throws away a fine opportunity by killing off the evil witch Morwen – yet another Morgan figure – far too early in the book. It's a mark of Walton's integrity as a writer that when she forgets herself and writes true to period, the story becomes more convincing, typically in terms of the manner of Urdo's political marriage to Elenn:

"Her betrothed killed in battle and apparently at one point her mother was offering her to anyone who could kill Black Draag. Only nobody could. Then suddenly she's whisked over here, married to Urdo, he spends the ritual night with her, and at dawn he's away off up here to fight."

Thus is it described to the first-person heroine of the piece, Sulien ap Gwien, cavalry officer of Urdo's household. Sulien is a conventional but acceptable heroine of her kind (once you've swallowed her context) but Walton unnecessarily deprives her story of much of its tension. We first meet her, aged sweet 17 and never been kissed, being gang-raped by six Jarnish raiders and left pregnant. A dreadful thing to happen to any girl – so will she get over it? Alas, no. Walton tells us straight off that this first sexual encounter is also to be her last, though she will live to record her memoirs aged 93. It's put her off for life, and no one succeeds in forcing her ever again.

Aho! You don't need sex for a good novel, and this has much to commend it, though Walton includes a number of rather flat passages relating to travel arrangements and the character of the country, which do nothing to advance the plot and insufficient to enhance the atmosphere. On the other hand, her writing aims high, and succeeds more often than not. She conveys a vision reminiscent of early Le Guin, in diction reminiscent of Renault. I must add that she neither manages the best of which either was capable, nor completely sustains their minimum standard, but when she falls short it's not by far, and this is volume one of a first novel, seeing her heroine to the age of 33. If she can truly immerse herself in the best work of both, she may one day be their equal – and how's that for a target? To do this, though, she'll have to forgo poetry. All her chapters have epigraphs, most of them in verse, and most of those weak to poor. On the other hand, she does fair pastiches of Caesar and Machiavelli. Let's hear it for a new, good prose-writer.

Chris Gilmore



The year 2000 may well come to be remembered as when the Big Commercial Fantasy novel finally began to pull its enormous weight, finally in some sense came of age.

After several decades of financially profitable but aesthetically senseless neo-Tolkienian epics, signs are at last visible of the originality, the conviction, and the complex clarity of vision needed to transform a genre of sorry simplistic turkeys into a literature worthy of the title. First there was *Ash: A Secret History* by Mary Gentle, arguably the year's best novel in any of the speculative genres; and now, with *A Storm of Swords* (Voyager, £17.99 and £11.99), George R. R. Martin concludes the initial triptych of his sequence *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and things may – indeed, should – never be the same again. A work of great grim majesty is taking shape, fit to occupy Tolkien's vacant throne: in Martin's dynastic parlance, a new true King, The Second of That Name.

Several factors may help explain Martin's extraordinary creative success in a medium inherently prone to tame ideological conservatism, dull conceptual derivativeness, and quaint moral clichés. First, Martin, unlike the vast majority of his rivals, has an impressive literary range: he began his career writing sf, winning several Hugo and Nebula Awards for his poetic space operas; from there, his restless career trajectory took him into Horror, writing for TV (*Beauty and the Beast*), comics-based shared world projects (*Wild Cards*), and finally into the Fantasy epic. Consequently, Martin can build worlds rigorously, convey authentic terror, script credible dialogue, and manipulate conventions with deliberate intelligence, a technical grounding second to none. Further, Martin's avowed model is Jack Vance, whose witty grasp of heroic foibles, as exemplified in his *Lyonesse Trilogy* (1983-1989), seems to underlie *A Song of Ice and Fire*, buttressing its Machiavellian stylization and ironic historical perspicacity. Indeed, it is historical awareness that lends *A Song* a lot of its force: Martin understands fully the treacherous dissonance between historical appearance and historical reality, and plays on it with an extraordinary consistent cruelty. His subject is Chivalry, and he interrogates it like the most exacting torturer his malignant Lannisters could ever dream of employing...

Martin's setting, Westeros, is a hugely enriched version of medieval England. Apparently of continental size, it once consisted of seven kingdoms, but was unified three centuries prior to the main action by the invading Targaryen family, who deployed dragons like napalm-dropping aircraft and so swept all before them. But

## The Second of That Name

Nick Gevers

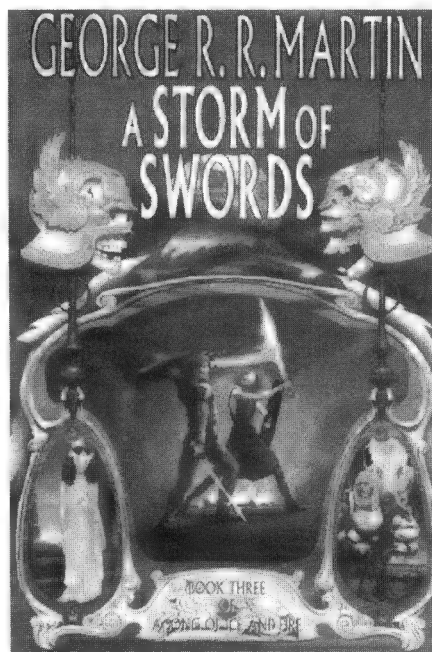
recently, the last Targaryen monarch, maniacally insane and unattended by dragons, was toppled; a new dynasty, House Baratheon, took over, but its first King was murdered, and the succession is now disputed. Some of the sub-Kingdoms secede; five Kings wage war backwards and forwards in the North and Centre of Westeros, at terrible cost to themselves and the common people; the two families most directly opposed, the Starks and the Lannisters (Yorkists and Lancastrians?), suffer horrible privations and gradually disintegrate, the Starks through physical separation and the Lannisters by way of internecine hatreds. As the volumes so far published – *A Game of Thrones* (1996), *A Clash of Kings* (1998), and *A Storm of Swords* – unfold, it becomes clear that an entire culture is facing its ultimate crisis, very much like late Medieval Europe on the brink of the Renaissance and modernity. For all their ostentatious chivalric heraldry (delineated at length in Martin's fascinat-

ingly extended Appendices), the aristocratic Houses of Westeros cannot sustain their high ideals, cannot protect the smallfolk they are sworn to defend, cannot do other than sunder the realm with their quarrels. Their mode of being – perhaps epic Fantasy's mode of being – is being challenged most savagely, and they respond quite ineffectively.

Three more volumes are to come; Martin's task so far has been to communicate the depth of Westeros's crisis, and to hint at the forces that threaten to exploit that crisis: the Others of the far North, inhuman creatures literally of Ice, and the agencies of Fire, notably the exiled Targaryen Queen, Daenerys, who entertainingly wanders Eastern lands, nurturing dragons and recruiting legions, in readiness for her Restoration. No doubt Volumes Four to Six will bring the battle of Ice and Fire to the foreground, and reconfigure Westeros's culture and political landscape in response to the demands of that battle; but for now, it is the ruin, the thinning, of a body politic that Martin emphasizes, and he does so superbly, not least in *A Storm of Swords*. His ten or so viewpoint characters, Starks, Lannisters, and a few other players in the game of thrones, progress towards their harsh destinies through tightly-constructed and -written episodes (no padding here, none of that bane of the bloated Fantasy cycle); they are always discovering scalding truths, always losing touch with their dreams and each other, always swept about by forces they cannot control, even if, like the vividly depicted dwarf Tyrion Lannister, they are masters of intrigue. There may be something soap operatic about Martin's characterizations, about the formulaic psychological twists he employs to set his protagonists at odds; but the resulting confrontations, combats, sallies, parleys, ambushes, misunderstandings, meditations, and conspiracies are so dramatic, so astonishingly potent and thematically appropriate, that they far transcend any formula. And all the while, the sense of a broader menace, the awareness that these individual vicissitudes are microcosms of the agonies of an entire continent, accumulates; every scene is purposeful, every seemingly random incident a part of a grand design. In service of his theme of the collapse of Chivalry, Martin plots with absolute precision, never allowing a detail to go amiss, never leaving a loose end – an astonishing achievement in a series already over two thousand pages long. By the end of *A Storm of Swords*, Martin's argument is about as persuasive as any in the history of genre fiction.

The books are weighty (975 pages in the case of the latest tome); but the rewards are vast.

Nick Gevers



This is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Aldiss, Brian. **Supertoys Last All Summer Long, and Other Stories of Future Time.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-043-1, xix+232pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf collection, first edition; apart from the title story, which is over 30 years old and was first collected in *The Moment of Eclipse* [1970], and apart [rather oddly] from one other much more recent tale, "Becoming the Full Butterfly," which first appeared in *Interzone* 93 and was collected in *The Secret of This Book* [1995], this gathering of 19 pieces appears to be "all new"; chief among them are two recently-written sequels to the title story, "Supertoys When Winter Comes" and "Supertoys in Other Seasons," neither of which seems to have had prior publication; there is also an interesting 12-page Foreword in which Aldiss describes his working relationship with the late Stanley Kubrick, who bought the film rights to the original "Supertoys" story many years ago and was planning to use it as the basis of his abortive sf movie *AI* [now in production from Steven Spielberg]; this volume, mostly consisting of brief, fable-like pieces, would seem to be Aldiss's pre-emptive strike before the likely appearance of the *AI* movie [sans Aldiss script] later in 2001; recommended.) 18th January 2001.

Anthony, Mark. **The Keep of Fire: Book Two of The Last Rune.** Earthlight, 0-671-02884-7, 442pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Youll, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999.) 4th December 2000.

Arden, Tom. **Sisterhood of the Blue Storm: Fourth Book of The Orokon.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06373-4, 558pp, hardcover, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the penultimate book of a five-volume sequence; the forthcoming final volume is advertised as *Empress of the Endless Dream* – nice title!) 30th November 2000.

Arden, Tom. **Sultan of the Moon and Stars: Third Book of The Orokon.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-988-0, 681pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 153.) 30th November 2000.

Barnes, John. **Finity.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-740-3, 303pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Harris, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; it's a parallel-worlds thriller.) 11th January 2001.

Baxter, Stephen. **Longtusk: Mammoth, Book Two.** Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-739-X, 292pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK,

2000; second in a trilogy which tells the story of the last of the mammoths from the animals' point of view; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 156.) 11th January 2001.

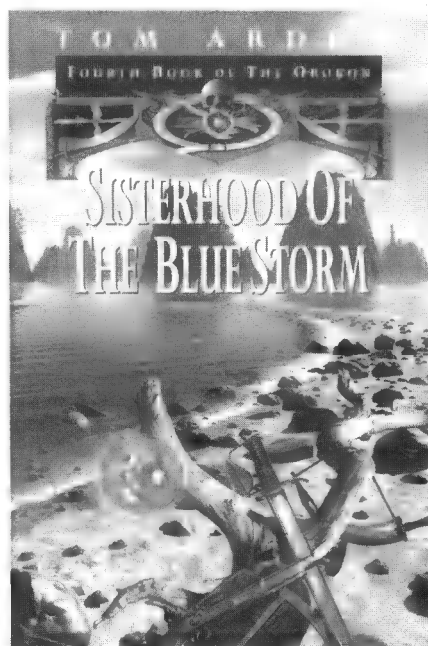
Benford, Gregory. **Eater.** Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-017-2, 386pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; a hard-sf blockbuster by the well-known physicist author; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 160.) 18th January 2001.

Bibby, James. **Shapestone: Further Translations from the Original Gibberish.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-930-9, 214pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Davis, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1999; the author's fourth volume of Pratchett-lookalike stuff; it would seem there was a hardcover edition in 1999, but, if so, we never saw it.) 4th December 2000.

Bradbury, Ray. **The Machineries of Joy.** Earthlight, ISBN 0-671-03771-4, 255pp, A-format paperback, cover by Trevor Scobie, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA, 1964; first Simon & Schuster/Earthlight printing [it was previously a Granada/Grafton Books paperback in the UK].) 4th December 2000.

Brooke, Keith, and Eric Brown. **Parallax View.** Foreword by Stephen Baxter. Illustrated by Dominic E. Harman. Sarob Press ["Brynderwen," 41 Forest View, Mountain Ash, Wales CF45 3DU], ISBN 1-902309-12-X, viii+175pp, hardcover, cover by Harman, £19.50. (Sf collection, first edition; limited to 250 copies; eight stories: six by the two authors in collaboration, plus a singleton by each; all but one first appeared in *Interzone* – hence, recommended by us.) Late entry: October publication, received in November 2000.

Bunch, Chris, and Allan Cole. **Sten 4: Fleet of the Damned.** "Over one million Sten books sold worldwide." Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-010-5, 340pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published



## BOOKS RECEIVED



NOV/DEC  
2000

in the USA, 1988 [not "1982" as it states in the book]; fourth in the paperback-original space-opera series.) 7th December 2000.

Butler, Octavia. **Wild Seed.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07145-1, 248pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1980; her fourth novel, this tale of immortal African shape-changers is the book which first brought Butler to wide attention.) 3rd December 2000.

Cacek, P. D. **Canyons.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87383-2, 302pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Horror novel, first edition; about a woman tabloid journalist who meets a werewolf, it's billed as "a terrific novel of horror, humor, sex, and shapechanging.") 8th December 2000.

Chizmar, Richard, ed. **The Best of Cemetery Dance, Volume One.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45804-4, 401pp, trade paperback, cover by Hans Neleman, \$14.95. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA as half of *The Best of Cemetery Dance*, 1998; it contains stories reprinted from the first 25 issues of the award-winning American small-press magazine *Cemetery Dance* – by Kim Antieau, Ramsey Campbell, Douglas Clegg, Peter Crowther, Ray Garton, Brian Hodge, Nancy Holder, Jack Ketchum, Stephen King, Bentley Little, Graham Masterton, Richard Christian Matheson, Norman Partridge, David B. Silva, Lucy Taylor and many others.) November 2000.

Clarke, Arthur C. **The Collected Stories.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07065-X, x+966pp, hardcover, £20. (Sf collection, first edition; a mammoth, single-volume gathering of all Clarke's short stories, from "Travel by Wire," which first appeared in a fanzine called *Amateur Science Fiction Stories* in December 1937, through to "Improving the Neighbourhood," a two-page squib from *Nature*, 4th November 1999; in



between those rather slight topping-and-tailing efforts, there's much solid, classic sf here, most of it previously collected in various volumes; the book carries a "2000" copyright date but seems to have been delayed into the new year; we saw an American proof of it a couple of months ago, but that edition is not due out until February.) 4th January 2001.

Clarke, Arthur C. **Profiles of the Future: An Inquiry Into the Limits of the Possible.** "Millennium Edition." Indigo, ISBN 0-575-40277-6, ix+213pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Non-fiction collection of futurological essays by a major sf writer, first published in this version in 1999; originally published in 1962; an earlier revised edition appeared in 1982; the Preface is dated "April 1999" and the book appears to have been fairly lightly updated throughout; as I stated when the hardcover of this revision appeared a year ago, "Oh, how I loved this book when I first read the Pan paperback edition as a 14-year-old! – which makes me almost afraid to try re-reading it.") 14th December 2000.

Clarke, Arthur C. **2001: A Space Odyssey.** Introduction by Stephen Baxter. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-055-5, xxx+252pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £12.99. (Sf film novelization, first published in 1968; based on the screenplay by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick; as well as Baxter's new ten-page introduction, this edition contains an equally long "Foreword to the Special Edition" by the author; our congratulations to Sir Arthur on reaching the year he has done so much to make famous!) 7th December 2000.

Clarke, Arthur C., and Michael Kube-McDowell. **The Trigger.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648383-6, 550pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK [?], 1999; written mainly by American writer McDowell, this is a near-future thriller on the old theme of the man who possesses the ability to destroy all the world's weaponry – compare C. S. Forester's *The Peacemaker* [1934] and Bob Shaw's *Ground Zero Man* [1971; also known as *The Peace Machine*].) 20th November 2000.

Crowley, John. **Beasts.** "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07143-5, 184pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1976; Crowley's second novel [following *The Deep* (1975)], and in some ways his most conventionally science-fictional.) 16th November 2000.

Crowley, John. **An Earthly Mother Sits and Sings.** Illustrated by Charles Vess. DreamHaven [912 Lake St., Minneapolis, MN 55408, USA], ISBN 1-892058-04-9, 14pp, paperbound, cover by Vess, \$10. (Fantasy short story, first edition; previously unpublished Crowley tale on a mermaid or "selkie" theme, here produced as a nicely-designed, saddle-stitched chapbook – one for the collectors.) No date shown: received in November 2000.

Delany, Samuel R. **Nova.** "SF Masterworks, 37." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-742-X, 224pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA,

1968; a very flashy space opera – the longest and perhaps the best of Delany's early novels.) 11th January 2001.

De Lint, Charles. **Svaha.** Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-87650-5, 300pp, trade paperback, cover by Sam Rakeland, \$14.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1989; to the best of our knowledge, this remains de Lint's only sf work – a tale of Native Americans in a future Canada.) 9th November 2000.

Dick, Philip K. **Now Wait for Last Year.** "SF Masterworks, 36." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-701-2, 225pp, B-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1966 [not "1975" as it states in the book].) 4th December 2000.

Douglass, Sara. **Crusader: Book Three of The Wayfarer Redemption.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648619-3, xi+584pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kev Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Australia, 1997; third in this Australian author's second Big Commercial Fantasy trilogy, appearing some years late in Britain.) 4th December 2000.

Faber, Michel. **Under the Skin.** Canongate, ISBN 1-84195-094-7, 296pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 2000; this is a debut work of "mainstreamer sf" by a new Dutch-born, Australian-raised, Scottish-resident writer, and was shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award in 2000; he is also the author of a collection of short stories, *Some Rain Must Fall* [1999]; the novel has attracted splendid reviews in both Britain and the USA, with comparisons to Alasdair Gray and Irvine Welsh from *The Guardian*, and to Jim Crace and Russell Hoban from *The Observer*, while the *Wall Street Journal* sees it as "a deftly paced social satire, an *Animal Farm* for the new century"; we're surprised to note that the publishers, in their accompanying publicity letter, miscast this a "mass market paperback edition" – it isn't: it's a B-format [i.e. "Picador-sized"] trade paperback, or snob-back.) 11th January 2001.

Feist, Raymond E. **Krondor: Tear of the Gods.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224680-5, vi+372pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £17.99. (Fantasy computer-game novelization, first edition; based, like its predecessors, on the game *Return to Krondor* [produced by Pyrotechnix, Inc.], it's Book III of "The Riftwar Legacy" – although that's not stated on the title page or cover.) 20th November 2000.

Ferlosio, Rafael Sanchez. **The Adventures of the Ingenious Alfanhui.** Translated by Margaret Jull Costa. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-59-3, 204pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jean Corbechon, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in Spain, 1951; this is the first English-language translation, even though the publishers tell us that this tale of the magical things that happen to a small boy "has enjoyed the success in Spain that Harry Potter has in the English-speaking world and is now firmly established as a contemporary classic"; hmm – we think they protest too much, and that they fail to comprehend the true awful magnitude of J. K. Rowling's success; nevertheless this

looks to be a charming childlike fantasy, and no doubt deserves its own more modest success.) 30th November 2000.

Forstchen, William R. **Down to the Sea: A Novel of The Lost Regiment.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45806-0, 342pp, A-format paperback, cover by Edwin Herder, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this appears to be the ninth in Forstchen's paperback-original "Lost Regiment" series about American Civil War soldiers who fall through some space/time warp and find themselves having to fight for survival in another world.) December 2000.

Garfinkle, Richard. **All of an Instant.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87260-7, 383pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; the second novel by the author of *Celestial Matters* [1996], which gained general praise; it involves time travel.) 8th December 2000.

Gernsback, Hugo. **Ralph 124C 41+.** A Romance of the Year 2660. Illustrated by Frank R. Paul. Introduction by Jack Williamson. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 68588-0255, USA], ISBN 0-8032-7098-4, xv+300pp, trade paperback, cover by Paul, £13.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1925; this is the American edition with a UK price and publication date added, distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; it appears to be a facsimile of the 1925 first edition, with the original illustrations, although the author's "Preface to the 1950 Edition" is also reprinted here; originally serialized in Gernsback's own technical magazine *Modern Electrics*, April 1911-March 1912], this is a work of great historical interest if small literary value; essential reading for those who would understand the roots of American magazine sf.) November 2000.

Greenberg, Martin H., and John Helfers, eds. **Warrior Fantastic.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-950-2, 310pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Sullivan, \$6.99. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains all-original sword-swinging fantasy stories by David Bischoff, Gary A. Braunbeck, Charles de Lint, Pauline E. Dungate, Bill Fawcett, Alan Dean Foster, Nina Kiriki Hoffman, Jody Lynn Nye, Diana L. Paxson and others; one of a series produced under Greenberg's aegis for DAW Books, which includes such earlier titles as *Battle Magic* and *Spell Fantastic*.) December 2000.

Greenberg, Martin H., and Larry Segriff, eds. **Guardsmen of Tomorrow.** DAW, ISBN 0-88677-918-9, 311pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bob Warner, \$6.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; it contains all-original space-war stories by Robin Wayne Bailey, William H. Keith, Jr., Jane Lindskold, Andre Norton, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Robert J. Sawyer, Josepha Sherman, Dean Wesley Smith, Michael A. Stackpole and others; an old-fashioned skiffy anthology, of the sort we don't often see these days, it's one of a series produced under Greenberg's aegis for DAW Books, which includes such titles as *Star Colonies*, *Alien Abductions* and *Far Frontiers*.) November 2000.



Haldeman, Joe. **The Coming**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00769-4, 217pp, hardcover, cover by Danilo Ducak, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; a statement on the acknowledgments page says: "The author gratefully acknowledges the influence of James Gunn's beautiful novel, *The Listeners*, on this book.") December 2000.

Haldeman, Joe. **Forever Free**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-931-7, 277pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1999; this, unlike his 1997 novel *Forever Peace*, which was merely a "thematic companion," is a direct sequel to Haldeman's famous 1974 novel *The Forever War*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 156.) 23rd November 2000.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Blue Moon: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-053-9, 418pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; eighth in the crime/dark fantasy series.) 7th December 2000.

Hamilton, Laurell K. **Burnt Offerings: An Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Novel**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-052-0, 392pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Stone, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1998; seventh in the crime/dark fantasy series.) 7th December 2000.

Hinton, Craig. **The Quantum Archangel**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53824-4, 284pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Sixth Doctor and Mel.) 8th January 2001.

Hoffman, Nina Kiriki. **A Red Heart of Memories**. Ace, ISBN 0-441-00768-6, 329pp, trade paperback, cover by Tim Barrall, \$12.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; shortlisted for the World Fantasy Award in 2000 [but a loser to — urk! — the comparatively thick-ear *Thraxas* by Martin Scott], it seems to be a gentle, whimsical sort of fantasy about a woman with special powers; and this is also an attractive, small, squarish-format paperback — more paperbacks should be like this.) December 2000.

Holland, Cecelia. **Floating Worlds**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07142-7, 542pp, C-format paperback, £12.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1975; this big book remains historical novelist Holland's only venture into sf; it's highly regarded by some, including Kim Stanley Robinson, who has called it "a neglected sf masterpiece.") 16th November 2000.

Jeter, K. W. **Blade Runner 4: Eye & Talon**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06865-5, 236pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Spinoff sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; after a hiatus of about three years, this is Jeter's third sequel-by-another-hand to Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* [1968] and to the 1982 film based on it, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* [movie title courtesy of the late Alan E. Nourse].) 11th December 2000.

Joyce, Graham, and James Lovegrove. **Leningrad Nights/How the Other Half**

**Lives**. "Binary 1." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-759-4, 61+69pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Two horror novellas, arranged *dos-à-dos*, first edition in this format; this is half of the anthology *Foursight*, edited by Peter Crowther [Gollancz, March 2000], whose individual novellas were first published as slim volumes by the small press PS Publishing in 1999; reviewed variously in *Interzone* 150 and 158.) 28th December 2000.

Keller, James R. **Anne Rice and Sexual Politics: The Early Novels**. McFarland [Box 611, Jefferson, NC 28640, USA], ISBN 0-7864-0846-4, 175pp, trade paperback, \$28.50. (Critical study of Anne Rice's early vampire novels and pseudonymous fantasy erotica; first edition; sterling-priced import copies should be available in Britain from Shelving Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN.) December 2000.

King, Geoff, and Tanya Krzywska. **Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace**. "Short Cuts: Introductions to Film Studies." Wallflower [16 Chalk Farm Rd., London NW1 8AG], ISBN 1-90336-403-5, 128pp, trade paperback, £11.99. (Illustrated critical primer on sf cinema, first edition; it looks to be a well-put-together basic guide to the cinematic sf genre, and carries a cover commendation from Kim Newman; the authors work at Brunel University, London; the publishers, who are new, have also done a "Short Cuts" book on *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch*, by Paul Wells, and advertise for 2001 such coming titles as *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe*, by Stephen Keane, and *The Crash Controversy*, a study of the furore surrounding Cronenberg's film *Crash*, by Martin Barker and others.) Late entry: announced as a September publication, but received in November 2000.

Koontz, Dean. **From the Corner of His Eye**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-7074-0, 646pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition [?]; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; the latest from

the increasingly invisible Mr Koontz, whose novels "have sold over 200 million copies worldwide"; it's odd how bestsellers become "invisible," isn't it? — the packaging of their books becomes more and more featureless, the blurbs more and more uninformative: it's only the author's name in very large type that counts, so prominent that author and work themselves seem to vanish, slipped away from the corner of the eye.) 14th December 2000.

Kuttner, Henry. **Fury**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07141-9, 208pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1950; originally serialized in *Astounding* in 1947, this Venus-set adventure is generally thought to have been a collaboration between Kuttner and his wife, C. L. Moore.) 16th November 2000.

Lackey, Mercedes. **The Black Swan**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07197-4, 376pp, C-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; not to be confused with Lackey's earlier "Mage Wars" title, *The Black Gryphon*, this is a retelling of *Swan Lake*.) 18th January 2001.

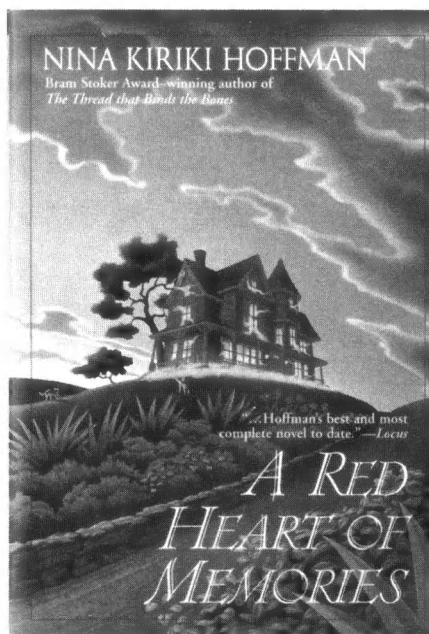
Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **Owlknigh**. Illustrated by Dixon. Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-741-1, 326pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jon Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; sequel to *Owlflight* and *Owlsight*, and part of the larger "Valdemar" series.) 11th January 2001.

Lawhead, Stephen. **The Black Rood: The Celtic Crusades, Book II**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648322-4, 518pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £5.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 2000; follow-up to *The Iron Lance* [1998]; the black rood of the title is "the beam which supported Christ during his crucifixion.") 15th January 2001.

Laymon, Richard. **Dreadful Tales**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-7159-3, 312pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £17.99. (Horror collection, first edition [?]; 25 stories, mainly reprinted from magazines such as *Cavalier*, *Gallery*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and *Mike Shayne's Mystery Magazine*, and described in the blurb as "a delicious cornucopia of homicidal maniacs, vampires and lust-crazed teenagers.") 4th January 2001.

Leith, Valery. **The Riddled Night**. "Everien: Book Two." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07074-9, 517pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; "Valery Leith" is a pseudonym of the Arthur C. Clarke Award-winning, American-born but British-resident, sf writer Tricia Sullivan.) 4th December 2000.

Lisle, Holly. **Vengeance of Dragons**. "The Secret Texts, Book 2." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-758-6, xvi+441pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; this was Lisle's second book to appear in Britain, although she has published a number in America.) 28th December 2000.



Lumley, Brian. **The Whisperer and Other Voices**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87695-5, 333pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Horror collection, first edition; proof copy received; nine stories, most of them dating from the 1970s and 1980s, and including the short novel "The Return of the Deep Ones.") February 2001.

Malzberg, Barry N. **In the Stone House**. Arkham House [PO Box 546, Sauk City, WI 53583, USA], ISBN 0-87054-178-1, vi+247pp, hardcover, cover by Allan C. Servoss, \$25.95. (Sf/fantasy/horror collection, first edition; an overdue new gathering of 24 stories from the prolific Mr Malzberg, who first made his name in the late 1960s and early 1970s with a profusion of short novels, but who has been silent as a novelist for some time now; these tales, almost all of them written "in voices," represent his more recent work, reprinted from *F&SF*, *Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine*, *Omni*, *SF Age* and other magazines and original anthologies of the 1980s and 1990s; "the cast of characters," states the blurb, "include[s] heroes and villains like composer/conductor Leonard Bernstein, explorer Christopher Columbus, mystery writers Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, Emily Dickinson, dictator Adolph Hitler, Tchaikovsky, talk show hosts, killers, spies... and people caught in webs of deceit, destruction and violence, trapped in time-warps and other dimensions...") 1st December 2000.

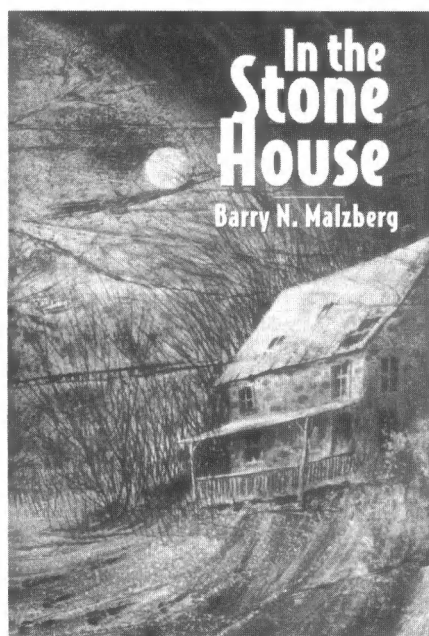
Martin, George R. R. **Dying of the Light**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-897-3, 365pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1977; this moody planetary romance, with its gimcrack proper names ["Jaantony Riv Wolf high-Iron-jade Vikary" indeed!], was Martin's debut novel.) 4th December 2000.

Martin, George R. R. **Fevre Dream**. "Fantasy Masterworks, 13." Gollancz, ISBN 1-85798-331-9, 350pp, B-format paperback, cover by Paul Wright, £6.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1982; this is Martin's vampire-and-steamboat novel, which marked his debut as a fantasy [as opposed to sf] writer.) 11th January 2001.

Martin, George R. R., and Lisa Tuttle. **Windhaven**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-940-6, 315pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £6.99. (Fix-up sf novel, first published in the USA, 1981; sections originally appeared in *Analog* magazine, 1975-1980; it's Martin and Tuttle's only collaborative novel.) 9th November 2000.

Michalson, Karen. **Enemy Glory**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-89061-3, 382pp, hardcover, \$24.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut Big Commercial Fantasy by a new American writer, and the first of a projected series which the publishers are likening to George R. R. Martin's fantasies.) January 2001.

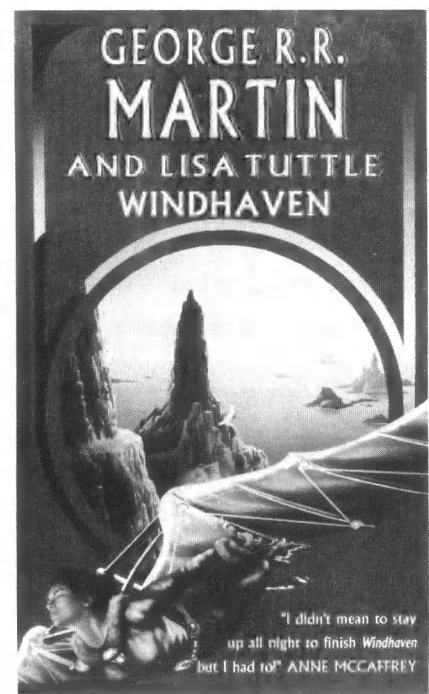
Middleton, Haydn. **Grimm's Last Fairytale: A Novel**. Abacus, ISBN 0-349-11121-9, 249pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mark Preston, £6.99. (Historical novel based on the lives of the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm; first



published in the UK, 1999; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 152.) 14th December 2000.

Mirrlees, Hope. **Lud-in-the-Mist**. Introduction by Neil Gaiman. "Fantasy Masterworks, 11." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-767-5, x+273pp, B-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1926; Mirrlees [1887-1978], is a little-known writer, but this, her only fantasy, as achieved the status of a minor classic – "a little golden miracle of a book," in Gaiman's words.) 30th November 2000.

Mitchell, Syne. **Murphy's Gambit**. Roc, ISBN 0-451-45809-5, 377pp, A-format paperback, cover by Matt Stawicki, \$6.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new American writer, it's commended by Eric S. Nylund, who calls it "adamantine-hard science fiction with a heart.") November 2000.



Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **Darksong Rising: Book Three of The Spellsong Cycle**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-011-3, 579pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mel Grant, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999.) 18th January 2001.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Octagonal Raven**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87720-X, 398pp, hardcover, \$27.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; an accompanying publicity letter says: "This is a work separate from any series, and opens a new future world for Modesitt readers.") February 2001.

Mohan, Kim, ed. **More Amazing Stories**. "The very last issue of *Amazing Stories*!" Tor, ISBN 0-312-87437-5, 320pp, trade paperback, \$14.95. (Sf anthology, first published in the USA, 1998; the veteran *Amazing* [founded in 1926] ceased publication in 1996; this book, put together by its last editor, consists in the main of "leftover" material, with stories by Eleanor Arnason, Gregory Benford, Philip K. Dick [a reprint from 1953], Ursula Le Guin, John Morressy, Linda Nagata, Nancy Springer, Howard Waldrop, Don Webb and others; there is also an essay by Robert Silverberg, on Philip K. Dick.) 6th December 2000.

Moon, Elizabeth. **Liar's Oath: The Legacy of Gird, Book Two**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-016-4, 506pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1992; described as "the second of two prequels to the hugely popular *Deed of Paksenarrion* trilogy.") 7th December 2000.

Moorcock, Michael. **The Dreamthief's Daughter**. "A Tale of the Albino." Earthlight, 0-684-86131-3, ix+342pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; the new novel about the adventures of Moorcock's most famous sword-and-sorcery hero, the albino Elric; an early version of a part of this work first appeared in *Interzone* 151 [January 2000], as "Ravenbrand.") 19th February 2001.

Newman, Kim, and Michael Marshall Smith. **Andy Warhol's Dracula/The Vaccinator**. "Binary 2." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-760-8, 91+72pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Two horror novellas, arranged *dos-à-dos*, first edition in this format; this is half of the anthology *Foursight*, edited by Peter Crowther [Gollancz, March 2000], whose individual novellas were first published as slim volumes by the small press PS Publishing in 1999; reviewed variously in *Interzone* 150 and 158.) 28th December 2000.

Nicholls, Stan. **Warriors of the Tempest: Orcs, First Blood, Book 3**. Gollancz, 0-57507-069-2, 280pp, C-format paperback, cover by Fangorn, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Bodyguard of Lightning* and *Legion of Thunder* [both 1999].) 16th November 2000.

Niven, Larry, and Jerry Pournelle. **The Burning City**. Orbit, ISBN 1-84149-028-8, xvii+678pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 2000; this is probably the first of Niven & Pournelle's many collaborations to be packaged as Big Commercial Fantasy rather than sf.) 18th January 2001.

Oltion, Jerry. **Abandon in Place**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-87264-X, 365pp, hardcover, cover by Vincent di Fate, \$24.95. (Sf novel, first edition; expanded from the Nebula Award-winning novella of the same title first published in *F&SF*, December 1996; the author's friends from the worlds of *Analog*-ish hard sf and *Star Trek*-ish spinoffery are out in force to commend it – Kevin J. Anderson, Poul Anderson, Greg Bear, David Brin, John Cramer, A. C. Crispin, Charles Sheffield, Allen Steele and [not a member of either of those caucuses, and therefore perhaps the most impressive name] Damon Knight.) 14th November 2000.

Parkin, Lance. **Father Time**. "Doctor Who." BBC, 0-563-53810-4, 282pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; featuring the Eighth Doctor.) 8th January 2001.

Pratchett, Terry, with Stephen Briggs. **Guards! Guards!** Illustrated by Graham Higgins. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06302-5, 122pp, hardcover, cover by Higgins, £16.99. (Humorous fantasy graphic novel, adapted by Briggs from Pratchett's original novel [1989]; first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 14th December 2000.

Read, William I. I. **Degrees of Fear: Tales from Usher College**. Illustrated by Nick Maloret. Sarob Press ["Brynderwen," 41 Forest View, Mountain Ash, Wales CF45 3DU], ISBN 1-902309-13-8, 183pp, hardcover, cover by Maloret, £21. (Humorous horror collection, first edition; limited to 250 copies; eight linked stories – three previously published, five original – by a British small-press writer; they seem to be attempts to rewrite M. R. James and H. P. Lovecraft in the manner of Tom Sharpe.) November 2000.

Schmitz, James H. **The Witches of Karres**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07144-3, 344pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1966; comical space opera involving three psi-powered little girls, this is probably the best-remembered book by American writer Schmitz [1911-1981].) 16th November 2000.

Shaw, Bob. **A Wreath of Stars**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07147-8, 189pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1976; a welcome reissue of what is perhaps the late Bob Shaw's most imaginative novel – about the discovery of an anti-neutrino parallel universe.) 3rd December 2000.

Shiel, M. P. **The Purple Cloud**. Introduction by John Clute. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 68588-0255, USA], ISBN 0-8032-9279-1, xvii+294pp, trade paperback, cover by R. W. Boeche, £9.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK, 1901; this is the American edition with a UK price and publication date added, distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; it's a facsimile of the Gollancz revised edition of 1929 [whereas the Chatto & Windus first edition of 1901 might have been preferable, but never mind]; Clute's

introduction is rather fascinating, and the novel itself [first serialized in shorter form in *The Royal Magazine*, January-June 1900] is still well worth reading.) November 2000.

Silverberg, Robert. **Thorns**. "Gollancz SF Collectors' Editions." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-07146-X, 222pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1967; a reissue of the novel which is generally regarded as marking the beginning of Silverberg's best and most productive phase as an sf writer, 1967-1974.) 3rd December 2000.

Simmons, Dan. **Darwin's Blade**. Harper-Collins/Morrow, ISBN 0-380-97369-3, 368pp, hardcover, \$25. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; despite its science-fictional-sounding title, this new Simmons opus is actually a thriller about automobile-accident insurance fraud; his previous novel, *The Crook Factory* [1999] – we didn't see it, seems also to have been a crime thriller of some sort.) November 2000.

Thomas, Matthew. **Terror Firma**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-710022-1, 437pp, A-format paperback, cover by the author, £5.99. (Humorous sf/fantasy novel, first edition; this pseudonymous British author's second novel, follow-up to *Before & After* [1999] – and apparently another exercise in Robert Rankin mode.) 2nd January 2001.

Turtledove, Harry. **Colonization: Down to Earth**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-76869-X, 620pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; second part of a follow-up series to the author's four-volume "Worldwar" series; the title is spelled "Colonisation" on the cover.) 7th December 2000.

Turtledove, Harry. **The Great War: Breakthroughs**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-71549-9, 486pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Stone, £17.99. (Alternate-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 2000; sequel to *The Great War: American Front* [1998] and *The Great War: Walk in Hell* [1999] in an ongoing tetralogy [not to be confused with all Turtle-

dove's other tetralogies] about a First World War which went differently from the one familiar in our timeline.) 4th January 2001.

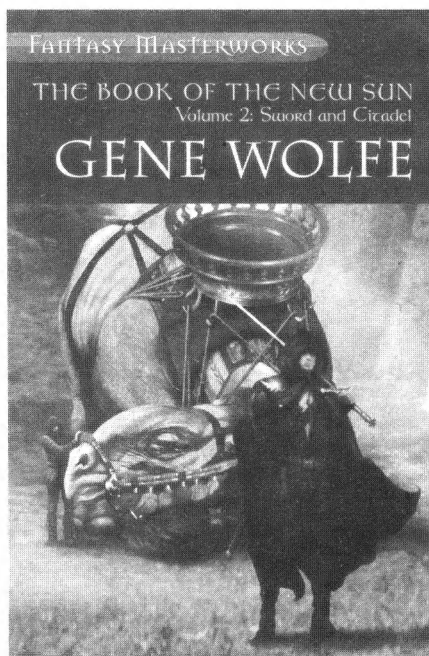
Wells, H. G. **The Sleeper Awakes**. Introduction by J. Gregory Keyes. Afterword by Gareth Davies-Morris. "Bison Frontiers of Imagination." Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 68588-0255, USA], ISBN 0-8032-9818-8, xvi+302pp, trade paperback, cover by R. W. Boeche, £9.95. (Sf novel, first published in the UK as *When the Sleeper Wakes*, 1899; this is the American edition with a UK price and publication date added, distributed in the UK by Combined Academic Publishers Ltd, 15a Lewin's Yard, East St., Chesham, Bucks. HP5 1HQ; it's a facsimile of the revised [and slightly retitled] edition of 1910; the afterword is full of useful information on the variant texts of this novel [first serialized in *The Graphic*, 9th January-6th May 1899] which is traditionally regarded as one of Wells's "problem" works – despite which, this is the third new edition of it we've received in recent years: the others were the Everyman edition edited by John Lawton [1994], and a very recent McFarland edition edited by Leon Stover [March 2000].) November 2000.

Whitbourn, John. **Downs-Lord Day: Panel Two of the Downs-Lord Triptych**. Simon & Schuster/Earthlight, 0-671-03301-8, 404pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Jenkins, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the publishers describe it as "an exciting fusion of fantasy and dark satire.") 4th December 2000.

Wolfe, Gene. **The Book of the New Sun, Volume 2: Sword and Citadel**. "Fantasy Masterworks, 12." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-700-4, 615pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £7.99. (Sf/fantasy omnibus, first published in this form in the USA, 1994; the two constituent novels, *The Sword of the Lictor* and *The Citadel of the Autarch*, were originally published separately in the USA, 1982 and 1983; this is the second half of what is assuredly a masterpiece, but is it fantasy rather than sf? – an amalgam of the two genres is probably the correct answer: a fantasy in feel, but with a strong sf underpinning; whatever, it's an essential work.) 28th December 2000.

Wolfe, Gene. **Epiphany of the Long Sun: Caldé of the Long Sun and Exodus from the Long Sun**. Tor/Orb, ISBN 0-312-86072-2, 720pp, trade paperback, cover by Richard Bober, \$17.95. (Sf omnibus, first edition; it contains the second pair of novels in the author's four-volume "The Book of the Long Sun" [1993-1996], which was hailed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* as further proof that "Wolfe may be the best science-fiction writer in the world.") 27th November 2000.

Womack, Jack. **Going, Going, Gone**. Voyager, ISBN 0-00-651105-8, 218pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; set in a time-bent New York, this seems to be Womack's first new novel since his "mainstream" satire on Yeltsin's Russia, *Let's Put the Future Behind Us* [1996].) 4th December 2000.





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